

FINDING OUR VOICES: THE BITTERSWEET JOURNEY OF A DREAM  
FOR  
FIRST-GENERATION FEMALE DOCTORAL GRADUATES

A Dissertation  
by  
REBA HOUSER YARBOROUGH

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**ABSTRACT**  
FINDING OUR VOICES: THE BITTERSWEET JOURNEY OF A DREAM  
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December 2012

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While much research exists on the topic of first-generation college students; there is limited research concerning the persistence of first-generation female doctoral graduates. This personal narrative builds on the frameworks of feminism and constructivism and implements qualitative inductive thematic analysis. The study's methodology included personal interviews, a focus group and document review. The document review included: 1) subjectivity journal notes, 2) interview transcripts and 3) focus group transcripts.

The research questions were: 1) What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies? 2) How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate? 3) What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education?

Data from the individual interviews, focus group interview and document review were analyzed using the principles of qualitative inductive thematic analysis. Based on the analysis of the data, four significant themes emerged: 1) finances, 2) relationships, 3) autonomous motivation, and 4) disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university. The four themes were used as the framework for analysis. Implications of the study and suggestions for further research are presented.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To you, Dr. Melanie Greene, my chairperson, mentor and friend, I thank you. When I walked into my first master's class in the fall of 1998, you made me believe in myself, and I knew that I, too, could achieve a doctorate. I am thankful for those long and late hours in your office proofreading my manuscript. I also wish to thank my other committee members, Dr. Sara Olin Zimmerman and Dr. Alecia Jackson, for giving of your time to read, edit and coach me throughout this journey, as well. I am also humbled by the ten lovely participants who gave sacrificially of themselves and allowed me to share in their memories and insights into their journeys as first-generation female doctoral graduates. I have been touched by your stories and I will never be the same. I thank God for each of you.

To Dr. Jim Killacky, I feel honored and blessed to have worked under your direction. Your kindness and support are appreciated. I also wish to thank my doctoral cohort, Hickory Two. I appreciate your encouragement and humor throughout our two

years together. Thank you, Dr. Vachel Miller, for your genuineness and for teaching me, as a writer, to keep the “lard,” or extra words, to a minimum. Thank you, Vickie Miller-Warren, my dear friend from the Ed.S. Winston-Salem cohort, for both your friendship and encouragement.

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## **DEDICATION**

“The most widely known form of dreamcatcher is a beautifully crafted, webbed object believed to hold onto the good parts of our dreams and filter out the nightmares. But a Dream Catcher is also a person, or the role of a person whose job is to assist people, Dream Chasers, in realizing their dreams, goals, or purpose in life.” C. Langston

A special word of thanks goes to my personal dream catchers. First of all, I wish to thank my wonderful husband, Marvin, of thirty amazing years. You have loved, supported and encouraged me throughout this bittersweet journey. I also wish to thank Danielle and Phillip, my amazing children, who have always been my inspiration. Catch and hold onto your dreams! This dissertation is dedicated to all of you, including my sweet mother. This dissertation is also dedicated in memory of my precious father. Thanks, Daddy, for those trips to college campuses during my early senior year of high school and for believing in me. Thanks to my faithful furry friend, Lainey Joy, who remained by my side well into the early morning hours as I wrote. Thanks to all of my dream catchers for always believing in me! Dreams do come true!



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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH**

#### **Making Connections/Past**

As a first-generation female doctoral student, I am passionate about first-generation female students and their “lived experiences” (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727). I grew up in a nurturing home; however, the dream of attending a four-year college or university was uncharted territory. My parents were open to my attending college and early in my educational journey were cognizant of my aspirations. I was on track to attend a local university; however, my father passed away unexpectedly during the fall semester of my senior year of high school. At that time in my life, my older siblings (ages 31 and 35) had established families with children; so therefore, I felt a personal obligation to remain by my mother’s side.

At that point in time, a college degree was not even a consideration. As a survivor, my sole task was to figure out a way to accomplish the bittersweet dream on my own. As a musician of thirteen years, I auditioned and was accepted into a private institution to continue my studies in piano; however, there was little assistance offered to me. I learned of a scholarship for which the organization planned to choose one male and one female at the county level, and I was determined that I would be, at the very least, a finalist. During the interview, I was scrutinized for nearly two hours. Following the interview, I felt hopeless. I felt like I had been dissected to pieces. My life was a shattered puzzle begging to be reassembled. To my elation, following the interview, I received a letter that I had been chosen for a full state scholarship. In continuing to prepare for attending college, I relied heavily on high school second-generation friends

and their parents to offer advice in navigating systems such as the preparing for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), planning for on-campus living, and other critical needs of a college freshman. Even though I was a top student in my graduating class, I felt a tremendous lack of support. With the support of family and friends, I was able to complete the undergraduate degree and begin my teaching career. As I look back on the undergraduate experience, I experienced tremendous gaps in the support I needed and would have benefited from support as a first-generation female college student.

### **Making Connections/Present**

Following graduation from college, I married and began my career as an educator. My husband was beginning his graduate studies in Fort Worth, Texas and I became a mother of two by age thirty. As our youngest child turned eight, I found myself as a first-generation master's degree-seeking student. My first course was with Dr. Melanie Greene, who immediately became a mentor. Although she was not officially assigned as an advisor; as a beginning graduate student, I found both her support and encouragement paramount to my success in the post-baccalaureate program of study. Even though the official advisor for the master's program and the majority of the professors were male, I was able to glean a tremendous amount of support from this significant woman in my professional studies.

Following several add-on certifications, I found myself continuing my studies as a first-generation female student seeking the Educational Specialist (EdS) degree. At this time, my children were seventeen and twenty-one years of age. Even though my children were older, I still wanted to attend their games, concerts, and other special events so juggling both home and school was at times difficult. My mother, 84 years of age at the



time, was an additional concern. I found that my studies, while serving as a mother, daughter, wife, employee and church pianist, collided at times. For example, my son's soccer practice would, at times, fall on the same evening as my daughter's soccer game. Obligations from home and work conflicted with my desires to return to school to complete further graduate work.

### **Problem Statement**

For a number of years, experts have acknowledged the fact that limited research data are available for the area of first-generation female doctoral graduates. Terenzini, et. al. (1996) pointed out the fact that there is limited research on the persistence of female students in doctoral studies at institutions of higher learning. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) further point out that few researchers have studied the persistence behaviors of first-generation female doctoral students. More recently, Holley and Gardner (2012) point to a lack of data related to first-generation doctoral student persistence. There also exists “an exceptional lack of research documenting the ‘lived experiences’ of female doctoral students, particularly research that can be used to inform policy and program development” (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727). Because of the specific need for further exploration in the significant gaps in persistence with first-generation female doctoral graduates, I have chosen this problem as the focus of my research.

## **Research Questions**

Three questions guided the research and provided insight into the life events/ experiences, decisions, entry and persistence of first-generation female doctoral graduates. Even though some research has been conducted in the field of women's persistence in higher education, I have noticed a void with regard to studies tied to their experiences in attaining post-graduate degrees. The following questions, as implemented in research conducted by Jackson and Mazzei (2012), guided the direction of my research:

1. What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies?
2. How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate?
3. What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education?

## **Methodology**

In my quest to address these three important research questions, I developed a qualitative study. This study involved the use of individual interviews of women who had attained the terminal degree. Potential participants were identified using network sampling. Glesne (2011) states that this specific form of sampling is implemented when the researcher develops a pool of participants who are recommended by others who know of possible participants who meet the researcher's criteria. Once a pool of women was developed, I mailed the Participant Consent Form and Demographic Questionnaire

(Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; see Appendix A), Cover Letter (see Appendix B) and Participant Consent Form (see Appendix C) which explained the research process in detail to potential participants. Once both documents were returned, the interviewee was contacted by email to set up the initial interview. Interview protocol (see Appendix D) and Script and Guidelines for the Focus Group (see Appendix E) were pre-established and approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB). Following the initial interviews, ten female participants were invited by email to an informal and collaborative focus group. The purpose of the focus group was to discuss the women's "lived experiences" in the world of academe (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727). For the focus group, I served as the moderator of the discussion. The women were encouraged to speak in their own voices, "yielding quotable, first-person prose that enlivens historical narratives" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 119). The focus group discussion evolved around open-ended questions as participants spoke about their experiences.

Pseudonyms were used throughout the interview and focus group meetings to ensure confidentiality. At no time during the study were the women's identities revealed by me. In addition to the individual interviews and the culminating focus group, other artifacts such as transcriptions of the interviews, transcriptions of focus group meeting and subjectivity journal notes (see Appendix F) were analyzed for further relevant information conducive to the study. These were named "asides" as seen in St. Pierre (1995) and are included to provide richness to the multi-dimensional personal narrative.

## **The Personal Narrative**

Chase (2011) reminds us that narrative inquiry is not only just flourishing, but is also continuing to evolve well into the twenty-first century. A multitude of books, articles and other resources is available on the topic of narrative inquiry and the journal, *Narrative Inquiry*, continues to prosper. Smith (2000) points out that many advocates believe that narratives provide relevant information that may or may not be available by other methods. Narrative inquiry “revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them” (Chase, 2011, p. 421). The researcher must maintain a focus on the narrated lives. Conversations are at the forefront of narrative inquiry. These conversations include “meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (Chase, 2011, p. 421). Once the spoken word is transcribed, the words become living text “with the symbolic narrative. If the word ‘text’ is understood in the broadest sense...as any coherent complex of sense...then even the study of art...deals with texts. Thoughts about thoughts, experiences about experiences, words about words, text about texts” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.25).

Language evokes thoughts, feelings and sensory experiences into a shared symbolic form-is the medium through which meaning and socially constructed reality can best be studied-provide access to subjective experience, providing insights into conceptions of self and identity and opening up new ways of studying memory, language and thought and socialization and culture (Smith, 1999, p. 328).

Feminist studies employ personal narratives or other forms of inquiry that draw the audience into a “special relation with the reader” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 240). The personal narrative is much more than writing in first person. It requires the ability of blending rich stories of life experiences. “Storytelling is integral to understanding lives and all people construct narratives as a process in constructing and reconstructing identity” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 14). Chase (2005) states that feminist theory and the personal narrative are compatible. “In everyday conversations we recount experiences or tell stories to inform, instruct, entertain, impress, empower, and/or exonerate” (Smith, 1999, p. 327).

When framed by feminist theory, the personal narrative can also have an “emancipatory purpose” (Chase, 2005, p. 651). Smith (1999) reiterates that narrative analysis deals with verbal data, such as stories or personal accounts of past experiences. Furthermore, the “in-depth face-to-face interview has become the paradigmatic feminist method” (Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1994, p. 34). The narrative, particularly, allows the researcher to grasp an understanding of life experiences. As researchers, we believe that people’s experiences and lives matter and are significant to the telling of the story. Bell (1997) continues to remind us that we are an instrumental piece in allowing people to remember that which may be difficult to remember or that which has been pushed aside.

The personal narrative also gives the researcher the permission to highlight, clarify and analyze those life histories. Via the personal narrative, researchers may illuminate a story and allow another to resurface. These stories may shift and change but, those shifts and changes are part of the journey. Because the journey is bittersweet, one may report her journey as one without obstacles while another sojourner may voice a

much different perspective. Qualitative researchers who are focusing on women are called to focus on and become more “sensitive to differences among women even in the same group and to concerns about the researcher’s own characteristics” (Oleson, 2005, p. 241).

The personal narrative “characteristically begins with the researcher’s autobiographically-oriented narrative associated with the research puzzle” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 40). This form of autobiographical storytelling “gives shape to life experiences” (Gaydos, 2004, p. 254). Written narratives have gained popularity over the past decade within the realm of qualitative research. Personal narratives provide an extra set of eyes or a “lens” to explore the self in relation to the stories of others within the discipline being studied. Personal narratives speak to the human need to be “truly known” (Gaydos, 2004, p. 254). In order to make sense of the world in which one lives, the personal narrative is essential to understanding one’s own personal journey and its connection to others in the same plight. Within the personal narrative, the narrator and the self-protagonist are “one and the same, and the voice is first-person” (Miller, 2009, p. 69). “The listener does more than cast a particular past experience in the first person; she creates another link in her personal history of telling and listening to stories, a history that helps to define her identity as narrator/listener” (Miller, 2009, p. 71). This first-person perspective allows one to emphasize her own “narrative action” (Chase, 2005, p. 662).

### **Significance of the Study**

Doctoral programs train future scholars who in turn, construct a variety of academic, research, and other professional careers. Given the importance of the degree to the country’s scientific ambitions and economic security, concern has been expressed

over the lack of student diversity in doctoral programs (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; National Science Foundation, 2008). Hoffer, Welch, Webber, et.al. (2006) point to data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates, an effort supported by the federal government to collect information related to doctoral graduates which reveals that more than one third of doctoral degree recipients, 37%, identify as first-generation, where neither parent earned a baccalaureate degree.

According to Holley and Gardner (2012), differences do exist in terms of first-generation doctoral students and academic disciplines. Nettles and Millett (2006) report that approximately 33% of doctoral students in the humanities have at least one parent with a Ph.D. or an advanced professional degree. However, only 16% of doctoral students in education have a parent with an advanced degree. Understanding the factors of student persistence for first-generation students is essential in attempting to understand the overall picture of their success in a doctoral program. Graduate student persistence is influenced by “the personal and intellectual interactions that occur within and between students and faculty and the various communities that comprise the academic and social systems of the institution” (Tinto, 1993, p. 231). Universities have the obligation to become more responsive to the “values, ideas, beliefs, talents, hopes, dreams and visions of women” (Heinrick, 2000, p. 63). Educating women requires the willingness to learn from the “scholarly efforts of women and to build new conceptual frameworks that include women’s experiences...it means questioning the values that prevent women from attaining their full potential...it means reshaping organizational structure, policies, and procedures and basic assumptions about the roles of women in society” (Pearson, Shavlik & Touchton, 1991, pp. 47-48). Women face significant personal challenges, related to

gender, in their determined efforts to complete a degree of advanced study. Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) report that, even though some women feel empowered by the doctoral journey, others tend to lose themselves throughout the process. First-generation female students are at an even greater risk because this sub-group is compared to those who are “pushing the boulder uphill” (Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004, p. 418). With the first-generation female student, the metaphor of the hill and boulder can be even more significant. The metaphors of the boulder and the hill refer to the first-generation student navigating difficult issues such as registration, housing options, course loads, financial aid.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

1. Bricoleur- One who creates a bricolage or a pieced together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).
2. Code-Switching- The switching of languages usually at the level of sentences or idiomatic expressions (Rabbani & Mushtaq, 2012).
3. Constructivism- Because knowing is not passive...but is active...human beings do not discover knowledge as much as construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experiences, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experiences (Schwandt, 2001).
4. First-Generation- The interpretation adopted by United States Department of Education TRIO programs states that graduates are considered first generation if neither parent graduated from a four-year college or university (United States Department of Education, 2012).



5. Going Native- To see, think, feel and sometimes even behave as the insider or native (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000d).
6. Imposter Syndrome- A feeling experienced by some professionals who ooze self-confidence but secretly feel like frauds and are waiting to be found out (Hutchinson, 2012).
7. Narrative Inquiry- The term encompasses the strategies involved in working with a variety of stories about life experiences found in interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs and other documents. Narrative inquiry focuses on voice and representation (Schwandt, 2001).
8. Qualitative Research- A field of inquiry that joins disciplines, fields, and subject matter. It refers to an interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).
9. Subjectivity Journal- A type of field notebook that assists with the subjectivity of the researcher. This form of field notebook should include descriptions, direct quotations and comments (Merriam, 2009).
10. Thematic Analysis- The researcher's way to search through the data for themes and patterns (Glesne, 2011).
11. Voice- In qualitative research, the researcher is concerned with who is speaking/heard and that which is heard. Voice is central to most feminist research and scholarship (Schwandt, 2001).

## **Organization of the Study**

I present the study implementing the traditional five chapter organization. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the research. This chapter includes the problem statement, research questions, methodology, the personal narrative, significance of the study, definition of key terms, and organization of the study.

Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive review of literature concerning the research on the topic of first-generation women as they experience college, post-baccalaureate, and doctoral programs of study.

Chapter 3 includes the study's research methodology. I outline the criteria necessary for choosing the participants, the settings, the actions and the process. My role, ethical considerations, reflexivity and validity are also included. A robust discussion of validity is included which focuses on triangulation, trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Chapter 4 presents a description of the research results. This section provides a description of the women's individual and group stories from the interview and focus group session.

Chapter Five will include an analysis and report of the findings. The limitations and implications of the study are discussed. Recommendations for future study are also included.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **DISCUSSION OF RELATED LITERATURE**

This chapter will include a discussion of related literature, which will include a brief history of feminism. A rich discussion of family support, finances, relationships, autonomous motivation and theoretical frameworks is also included.

Women have struggled for years creating a niche for themselves in the world of education, work, life and society. As a teenager, when my father passed away, there existed an unspoken word, a silent nudge, to stay by my mother's side and take care of her. I felt obligated to stay and hesitant to go. "Today, women are torn between the past and a possible, but difficult and, as yet unexplored, future" (Walters, 2005, p. 98). While I, as a first-generation female pursuing a degree in doctoral studies, had the freedom to register for doctoral classes, some of my female predecessors have not been as fortunate. Women have historically been viewed in the role of homemaker, which transcends centuries. Since these beliefs were so widespread, many questioned the reasoning for educating women. There have been moments in the history of womankind that women were prohibited from attending a college or university, much less registering for a course in the humanities. Modern western culture has historically attempted to impede women from entering institutions of higher education.

It was not until the 18th century, that women began to maintain their need and desire for higher education. As early as the mid-1700s, Abigail Adams declared "that the new society should make a place for learned women" (Soloman, 1985, p. 1). During the early and mid-19th century, Horace Mann (1796-1859) served in many roles; but, perhaps his most important roles were as education reformer and advocate for women's

rights in higher education. “Prepare woman for duty and usefulness, and she will laugh at any boundaries man may set for her” (Birney, 1885, p. 275). Because of the work of Mann, public schools were growing in popularity. According to Gappa and Uehling (1979), by the mid-19th century, the growing number of public schools required approximately 200,000 teachers for the increasing population of school-age children and 90% of the population were female. Also, because of the Civil War and declining enrollments, colleges were in desperate financial need. Because of this anomaly and a decline in male enrollment, colleges began to open their doors to women to meet the growing financial turmoil. By the end of the 19th century, women’s colleges were offering programs which were equal to those of the more “prestigious” men’s schools (Gappa & Uehling, 1979, p. 5).

According to Blount (1998), immediately following World War I, people “swept” to college and the masses included diverse groups of women and men alike (Soloman, 1985, p. 141). Soloman (1985) also indicates, while most women attended coeducational institutions, some attended women’s colleges. Even though the doors were opened to women, controversies still existed over how to integrate “undergraduate study with their future roles as wives and mothers” (Soloman, 1985, p. 150). The era of World War II also provided more opportunity for females to enroll in programs that were once considered “male fields” such as engineering (Soloman, 1985, p. 188). The tides were changing, but slowly. Additionally, Title VI (1964) of The Civil Rights Act “prohibits discrimination based on race, sex, religion, color and national origin” (Glazer-Raymo, 1999, p. 14).

Walters (2005) points out that during the early 18th century, female pioneers such as Mary Astell worked diligently to free women from the tyranny of thought, the uncharted journeys and the unspoken word. Astell was one of the world's first true women sojourners. Like so many other trailblazers, Astell had an intrinsic determination and a strong will to succeed in a patriarchal world.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) states the average age for a woman to earn a doctoral degree in the field of education is 43 years. This is in stark contrast to the average age of women, age 34, who earn doctorates in other disciplines. In the United States alone, women achieve 49% of all doctoral degrees and 67% of doctoral degrees in education. Women must juggle many responsibilities as they earn a doctoral degree. The responsibilities of motherhood, employment, family, and/or school may impede the success rate of women who achieve a doctoral degree. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), the lapsed time in completing a doctoral degree in education is 17.3 years. First-generation doctoral students must navigate a highly “interrelated, web-like series of family, interpersonal, academic, and organization pulls and pushes that shape student learning (broadly conceived) and persistence” as they move toward their goal of the doctor of education (Terenzini, et. al., 1996, p. 13).

Choy (2001) reminds us that first-generation students are disproportionately non-white, low-income, and female. Those who expected to complete studies beyond the bachelor's degree were 7% more likely to persist than those who only expected to complete a bachelor's degree or less. First-generation students who chose a particular institution because of the reputation of the faculty were nearly 16% more likely to persist than those who did not consider this factor. First-generation students who chose an

institution based on their ability to live at home while enrolled in school were 18% more likely to persist than those who were unable to reside at home. First-generation students attending private institutions were 12% less likely to persist during the first two years than those attending public institutions.

Private institutions may be a cost burden. Also, the possibility that attending college among wealthier peers at private institutions might burden first-generation students making college more difficult and more expensive. It is also possible that some private institutions continue to offer a campus academic and social life primarily designed to serve more traditional students and first-generation students who live on campus at private institutions may become disconnected from their family support networks and native cultures. This possibility would also be consistent with the additional finding of this study that first-generation students who identified being able to live at home as a reason for choosing their particular institution was significant. The estimated effect on persistence of residing on campus was negative for first-generation students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 419).

Interestingly enough, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) also found that for every ten-thousand unit increase in enrollment, first-generation students were 4% more likely to persist. For every one-unit increase in grade point average, first-generation students were 12% more likely to persist during the first two years. First-generation students who were satisfied with their social lives were nearly 17% more likely to persist than those who were not satisfied. For each one thousand dollar increase in work-study aid, first-

generation students were 6% more likely to persist. Despite the overwhelming lack of data related to first-generation doctoral student persistence, research has identified factors that influence the graduate school experience for all students. This includes, but is not limited to, “family encouragement, institutional support, and mentoring/advising” (Council of Graduate Schools, 2009).

### **Family Support and Finances**

First-generation students with higher incomes are significantly more likely to persist than those with lower incomes suggesting that lower-income first-generation students are not “only disadvantaged by their parents’ lack of experience with and information about college, but also by other social and economic characteristics that constrain their educational opportunity” (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 418). Moyer, Salovey, and Casey-Cannon (1999) found the following concerns for the total sample of women surveyed: 1) concerns surrounding employment, 2) financial concerns, and 3) concerns about securing grant money. 10% of the female respondents were concerned about the lack of research grant money or a lack of funding. These women shared that they spend a major portion of their time writing grants or seeking other measures for academic funding. Age, ethnicity and student classification appear to be indicators in financial literacy.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that women who constituted the majority of first-generation students were significantly less likely than males to persist. Even though women have entered higher education in greater numbers, gender-based inequities in educational opportunity still exist. This finding is cause for concern and calls for further investigation.

Horn, Chen, and Adelman (1998) point out that assistance with financial aid is a major factor which affects college attendance and success for first-generation female students. According to Pathways to College Network (2007) high school graduation, college enrollment and degree completion are all factors which are strongly linked to income and race. Students of poverty are becoming a greater concern for institutions of higher education, especially during the recent decline of the economy.

Terenzini et. al. (1996) found that first-generation students received less support from their family to attend college compared to non-first-generation students. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini (2004) emphasized the importance of family cultural capital on informing students about college enrollment, degree options, and demands of a college curriculum. These personal influences are significant and they remain essential to how students interpret and experience the higher educational process, particularly as they move through advanced studies.

A study by Eltel and Martin (2009) also indicates an intense need for financial literacy workshops at the graduate level. Student aid provides access, but most students, once enrolled in graduate school, are over-whelmed by surmounting debt in student loans and the lack of a family support system. Since women's incomes are sometimes necessary for the family survival and especially when there are young children at home, the dream of a doctorate rarely becomes a reality. Even though higher education is an entryway to a better social and economic class and "lifetime stability," many students are unable to see the "light at the end of the tunnel" (Terenzini, et.al., 1996, p. 2).

Meyers (1999) conducted interviews with doctoral students who failed to complete the dissertation and were classified as completing the doctorate with all but the



dissertation (ABD). These students indicated that a lack of family support was a major factor in their failure to complete the doctorate. Survivor guilt is a phenomenon that exists in which the first-generation student believes she should not have survived or achieved because there are certainly more deserving people who should have accomplished what they have accomplished. This is a major issue with first-generation students and sometimes becomes a barrier to academic successes. Single mothers and/or married women are at risk for survivor guilt which creates conflict, and is “manifested as numbing or withdrawal” (Piorkowski, 1983, p. 620). Survivor guilt, in relation to first-generation women, can be overwhelming when the woman feels that others are more qualified for the accomplishments she has achieved. Another example of survivor guilt is when the first-generation student returns home from college and her English grammar or manner of speaking has improved and thus, she becomes “the object of ridicule by family members who feel threatened by such differences from family norms. . .survivor status tends to create conflicts” (Piorkowski, 1983, p. 620).

### **On Being Women**

Eltel and Martin (2009) indicated that first-generation female students make up a significant portion of the diversity in higher education. Moyer, Salovey and Casey-Cannon (1999) found that female doctoral students are concerned about being women, their race or ethnicity, emotional and psychological health. Stress among students, in general, is high; however, stress among students who are pursuing post-graduate work is at an all-time high. They also noted concerns about emotional, psychological and social wellbeing which were reported by 17% of participants. These concerns involved

“depression, lack of self-esteem, isolation, and/or strains on social relationships” (Moyer, Salovey & Casey-Cannon, 1999, p. 616).

Women face significant personal challenges related to gender, in their efforts to complete a degree of advanced study. Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) report that, even though some women feel empowered by the doctoral journey, others tend to lose themselves throughout the process. “A practical beginning for a renaissance in doctoral education might be a re-examination of the experiences, knowledge and opinions of what leads women to successful completion and to enhance the understanding of contemporary graduate students including older students, women and members of ethnic minorities” (Beeler, 1993, p. 6). The general purpose of a professional doctorate is to provide advanced research and to “contribute to the advancement of professional knowledge and practice” (Scott, Brown, Hunt & Thorne, 2004, p. 89). Understanding the factors of student persistence is essential when one is attempting to understand the overall picture of the women’s success in a doctoral program.

### **Relationships**

High school counselors, college counselors, and other professionals who come into contact with first-generation students should make a special effort to provide first-generation students:

With the kinds of information and experiences that allow them to envision, perceive, or even observe real opportunity for success regardless of the type of institution or the size of the institution they choose to attend. Helping students discover and understand opportunity for success in terms of the academic, the social, and the financial dimensions of different types

of institutions are equally important and mutually reinforcing.

Understanding various funding possibilities for financing higher education at a private institution can allow first-generation students to see ways to manage the higher cost often associated with attending such an institution. Additionally, in terms of understanding the academic and social climates of the campus, counselors can encourage students to spend extended, productive time on campus (making both daytime and overnight visits, participating in campus activities, attending classes and interviewing current first-generation students at the campus of their choice-to gain a clear picture of the realities of campus life at a particular institution (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 420).

According to Moyer, Salovey and Casey-Cannon (1999) some further concerns exist concerning female doctoral students. These concerns are, but are not limited to: 1) academic and professional development and professional issues, 2) balancing the personal and professional sides of one's life, 3) stress and time pressure, 4) faculty, supervisors, or administrators, 5) lack of a supportive environment, and 6) dealing with academic systems.

Faculty support is essential for the successful doctoral experience; however, the sense of community is running a close second. Based on the work of Katz and Hartnett (1976), the relationship with faculty is key to the successful completion of a doctoral degree. A consensus of goals is also needed within the educational department. Another determining factor is dedicated faculty on the student's committee. Duggan (2003) found that one of the major indicators to ensure success for the first-generation student is the

ability to meet regularly with an advisor. According to Austin et. al. (2009) the advisors' lack of support contributed to the majority of doctoral candidates not completing the doctoral dissertation.

First-generation female students are increasingly more taxed with academic, financial and family concerns. Educating women requires the willingness to learn from the "scholarly efforts of women and to build new conceptual frameworks that include women's experiences...it means questioning the values that prevent women from attaining their full potential...it means reshaping organization structure, policies, and procedures and basic assumption about the roles of men and women in society" (Pearson, Shavlik & Touchton, 1991, pp. 47-48).

Austin and McDaniels (2006) point out specific skills which are necessary for doctoral students and are best learned through socialization. Research by Horn, Chen, and Adelman (1998) points out that peer and parental encouragement are important to at-risk youth who are attending college and certainly, first-generation women are in this category. Additionally, engagement in extracurricular activities is of importance to the first-generation student. Katz and Hartnett (1976) also note the importance of an academic social environment. These skills include, but are not limited to knowledge of one's discipline and its norms, interpersonal skills, and professional habits and attitudes. These interactions are equally important between the student and faculty, the student and peers, and between the student and other department members. Gardner (2008) iterates the importance of peer-group opportunity for socialization. Students interviewed indicated a keen sense of belonging to a group as a key indicator of success at the

graduate level. Graduate school definitely requires multi-tasking, therefore, these collaborative life skills are critical.

Additionally,

Socialization of graduate students by faculty has to do with the extent to which students feel accepted and respected by members of the faculty, the degree to which the students are able to relate to members of the faculty as friends and colleagues rather than as unapproachable superiors-in essence, this dimension reflects the amount of psychological distance that separates the lives of the graduate students and the faculty (Katz & Hartnett, 1976, p. 59).

Gladioux and Swail (1999) point out that the American post-secondary education system, as we know it, is among the most diverse, open, and accessible in the world. However, significant inequities exist in educational attainment by gender, income and race. Disparities, such as these, continue to contribute to the perpetuation of socioeconomic stratification in American society. Being the first to attend college can be tremendously overwhelming. London (1996) points out that when one is the first to experience the culture of college, the lack of significant information about college makes participation in higher education a burdensome task for first-generation students.

Furthermore, the integration of socialization and academic life plays an important role in the persistence decisions of first-generation students. Campus clubs, organizations and scheduled activities need to be set up in creative ways and be more cognizant of the values and priorities first-generation students exhibit. Additionally, campuses need to better accommodate students' complicated schedules. Many first-

generation students are employed while attending college and sometimes have more commitments, especially with family. These students may find it difficult to take part in organizations and activities because of the scheduled times at which these events occur or the amount of time needed to participate in the selected activity. Student Affairs' personnel on campuses with large first-generation student populations might want to "reevaluate their club and other student activity offerings to ensure that first-generation students have opportunities for participation that might enhance their persistence, as well" (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 421).

Gardner (2010) noted the "crucial impact of socialization on degree completion, especially the extent to which students engage in productive relationships with faculty and peers. She further indicated that a student's ability to cope with ambiguity is inherent to socialization. She concluded, "As students begin a new phase of their degree program, they experience both the transition, as well as a great deal of ambiguity regarding the expectations-ambiguity then feeds into the need for self-direction" (Gardner, 2010, p. 76).

### **Autonomous Motivation**

Since family support is lacking for most first-generation students, autonomous motivation is a key factor for completion of a terminal degree. Brophy (2008) points out one type of autonomous motivation which is also known as Identified Regulation and occurs when we adopt a goal as personally important and valuable to us. Students engage in these activities primarily because they view the learning activities as "important for their self-selected goal of gaining admittance to college or a particular occupation" (Brophy, 2008, p. 132). Some female students view education as the initiation of the

career and thus, a “catalyst for career development and accelerated promotion” (Wellington & Sikes, 2006, p. 724). These motivated female students include those who are “more established and those who perceive the doctorate as a professional continuation, contributing to career development and enhancement” (Wellington & Sikes, 2006, p. 724). Brophy (2008) points out another form of autonomous motivation which is referred to as intrinsic motivation and occurs when our actions are experienced as wholly self-determined and performed out of interest. Students engage in these activities because they find the content “interesting or the activity enjoyable” (Brophy, 2008, p. 132). This group includes those who are likely to be well established in a career and who had enrolled “primarily for reasons of personal fulfillment as well as for intellectual challenge” (Wellington & Sikes, 2006, p. 724).

In conclusion, this research study will employ the personal narrative and embrace the voices of the participants and their personal journeys or “lived experiences” (Mansfield, et.al., 2010, p. 727). I will delve into the reasons these females pursued, persisted and completed their journeys by examining their experiences as first-generation women in higher education.

The previous chapter provided a rich literature review which demonstrated the gaps in research which this study sought to address. The following chapter will explore the frameworks: constructivism and feminism. The framework of constructivism allowed the participants the opportunity to co-construct meanings and events experienced as a first-generation female student during the data collection process which included interviews, focus group and subjectivity journal. During the focus group, the feminist framework allowed the women to blend their individual voices as one.

The research design section will include a thorough description of the setting, the actors, the events and the process. My role as researcher is also included to provide richness to the data collection. Ethical considerations such as reflexivity are explained. An in-depth look at the validity of the study, including triangulation, trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are described in detail. A Dissertation Crosswalk is also included, which outlines the three research questions, the data sources, the analysis and timeline.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I will describe the theoretical frameworks, research design and methodology used to better understand the journeys of first-generation female doctoral graduates. The personal narrative is used as the strategy of inquiry. Smith (1999) points out that narrative inquiry allows the participant to reflect or recall significant events. By doing so, the opportunity to recant the stories provides meaning, perspective and coherence on those experiences and even one's personal social traditions.

#### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The main theoretical framework for this study is constructivism. However, one would be remiss not to mention feminism when dealing with studies about women and most certainly, studies which focus on the voices of women, either individually or collectively. According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), instead of discovering knowledge, humans construct knowledge. As stated previously, first-generation female students have been compared to those “pushing a boulder uphill” (Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004, p. 418). Changing the analogy to “hill-climbing may provide a better way to represent Jean Piaget's view about human knowing” (Smith, 1993, p. xi). Piaget's writings on the topic of constructivism can definitely be a struggle for one to understand, for “hill-climbing can be hazardous since there is ample scope for walking in a circle, losing the way and even falling” (Smith, 1993, p. xi). Constructivism and feminism are both empowering. With constructivism, the learner takes the power, constructs and owns the knowledge. With feminism, power is a major theme. As the participants speak about relationships, mentors, experiences, family backgrounds, socio-economic situations,

tensions and other memories, or lack-thereof, which are relevant to their own personal journey, a construction of knowledge begins anew. The role of “questioning, disequilibrium, learners paraphrasing each other and discussing ideas in learning communities” assists the learners as they construct new knowledge, move beyond obstacles, and sojourn up the road to success (Fosnot, 2005, p. 279).

Meaning is the result of humans setting up relationships, reflecting on their actions and modeling and constructing explanations... Since these individual constructs are built from reflection on strategies (schemes), on ideas (structures), and on models (representations), learning needs to be understood as the individual development of strategies, ‘big ideas,’ and models, but with a cultural, social community of discourse” (Fosnot, 2005, p. 280).

Fosnot (2005), additionally, reminds us that constructivism is more about a theory of learning, rather than a theory of teaching. As one begins to analyze the theory of constructivism, one begins to “formulate a reformed practice that supports rigor, empowerment, and the construction of genuine understanding” (Fosnot, 2005, p. 290). Additionally, language in women’s studies is of utmost importance and critical to the researcher’s ability to expose the voices of the participants. “We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 30).

In the case of qualitative research, it is imperative that female participants are “provided an opportunity in freeing a diversity of long-silenced voices, paying heed to long-unheard languages. . . We become aware of multiple meanings in the making. . . We

discover our own reality becoming more and more multifarious, more likely to be transformed” (Greene, 2009, p. 119). As the women’s stories are “relayed and the meanings are constructed, the reverberations extend beyond the immediate encounter-In fact, one is urged to look from a lived perspective” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 20).

As first-generation female doctoral graduates, we find solace in knowing that our voices matter. “Voice lingers close to the truth and the real-has become seen almost as a mirror of the soul-the essence of the self” (Jackson, & Mazzei, 2012, p. 1). The way we perceive and experience the world in which we live is vital to women who feel the strains of oppression in the job force and other traditional patriarchal systems. “Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 236-237). Additionally,

Human communication- is based on language; language is based on words; and words are symbols. A symbol, by definition, is something that signifies something else. . . Symbols, then, have no inherent meaning, and therefore, require interpretation. The act of interpretation is critical to all of our social experiences, not just the processing of language. . . Since no two people have the same history of experiences, no two people interpret the same event or object exactly the same way (Heiner, 2002, pp. 8-9).

Finally,

All research is interpretive; it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. Some beliefs may be taken for granted, invisible, only assumed, whereas others are highly problematic and controversial. Each interpretive paradigm makes particular demands on the research,

including the questions he or she asks and the interpretations the researcher brings to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 33).

Feminism is also an essential component of this study, as the voices of ten women were emphasized. Feminism focuses upon the “lived experiences” of women who have succeeded in completing the doctorate (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727). Reinharz (1992) points out the fact that feminism is a perspective and not a method. Smulyan (2000) mentions that most feminist researchers intend to carry out research that contributes to social change, in particular, positive changes for women and their position, status or experience. Additionally, Reinharz (1992) points out that feminism, as a perspective, enjoys highlighting human diversity and frequently includes the perspective of the fieldworker as a source of data and employs interactive research.

Bryman (2004) appeals for a direct relationship between qualitative research and feminism. Historically, the two have had a tumultuous relationship. However, Bryman (2004) also continues to point out that qualitative research allows women’s voices to be heard and ensures that exploitation will likely be reduced. Qualitative research also emphasizes the fact that women will not be treated as objects but as subjects. With the combination of qualitative and feminist research, women’s perceptions are not controlled by the researcher’s technical procedures and the goals of feminism will continue to alleviate oppression.

Aligning with the frameworks of constructivism and feminism, narrative inquiry assists with constructing a person’s knowledge and sense of self and/or identity. Narrative inquiry may also produce an organizing principle for human action. Qualitative research crosses disciplines, voices and fields of study.

Additionally, qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including subjectivity journal notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, records, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings [places where every day experiences take place], attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b, p. 3).

Qualitative research may take on multiple and gendered images such as “scientist, naturalist, field-worker, journalist, social critic, artist, performer, jazz musician, filmmaker, quiltmaker, or essayist” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). Janesick (2000), who was influenced by Elliot Eisner and John Dewey, approaches the problem of research design from an aesthetic, artistic, and metaphorical perspective. She explains that the qualitative researcher implements a variety of techniques and rigor in working to “capture the nuance and complexity of the social situation under study” (Janesick, 2000, p. 381).

Janesick (2000) compares the design of the study which begins with “fixed moments. . .precise interviews are planned, observations are scheduled, documents are reviewed and analyzed. . .within the parameters of the interviews, information is

disclosed that allows the researcher to improvise, to find out more about some critical event or moment in the lives of the participants” (Janesick, 2000, pp. 381-382). Like the quiltmaker, the researcher “begins the art of charting interviews...sometimes improvisational. One interview may lead the researcher to find out that another individual may become part of the study for one reason or another. One document may lead to many more and so on. Likewise, the researcher charts the progress and examines the route of the study as it proceeds by keeping track of his or her own role in the research process. A good way for the researcher to do this is to keep a reflective journal of the research process” (Janesick, 2000, pp. 381-382). Like quiltmakers, the researcher documents her thinking and works in her notes-she may do the same to contribute to the historical record (Janesick, 2000, pp. 381-382).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000b) point out the fact that qualitative research is global in that it takes into account and attempts to grasp an understanding of the whole picture. This genre of research was never intended to control others; however, it does look closely at relationships within cultures and/or systems. It is more concerned with personal interactions than numbers on a page. This form of research focuses on an understanding of certain social settings, rather than making predictions about those social settings. It is a demanding form of research, in that it requires the researcher to spend the same amount of time in the field as she spends on analysis of the results. In the field of qualitative research, the researcher becomes the research instrument and must be skilled at handling face-to-face interactions, such as focus groups and/or interviews. Qualitative research is also concerned with ethics and biases. Once the data have been collected, in qualitative research, an “authentic and compelling narrative of what occurred in the study and

various stories of the participants” are key as on-going data analysis emerges (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a, pp. 386-387).

Additionally,

Three interconnected, generic activities define the qualitative research process. They go by a variety of different labels, including theory, method, analysis, ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Behind these terms stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspective. The gendered, multicultural situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis). That is, the researcher collects empirical materials bearing on the question and then analyzes and writes about them. Every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b, p. 18).

### **The Research Design**

Miles and Huberman (1994) mention four components of data collection (for qualitative research) which include the setting, the actors, the events and the process.

The four components for this research study are detailed below:

**Setting.** The setting of the study is the western region of a southeastern state in the United States. The interviews and focus group were held in convenient locations for the participants. The locations were carefully chosen to ensure privacy and

confidentiality. According to Glesne (2011), it is imperative to locate a site that is not only convenient, but appropriate. The selection of the site helps ensure a successful interview. Thus, I traveled to a space that was convenient for each interviewee. For eight of the ten women, we met in their office space which was more comfortable for them. In some cases, I did not feel I had enough space to take notes, but my main concern was their comfort. One of the women suggested we meet in a coffee shop on a Sunday afternoon and this is where the interview began. We ended up meeting for about fifteen minutes in this location and moved to her office which was in close proximity to the coffee shop. The reason for the move was lack of privacy and extensive noise from the patrons. For another woman, her office offered no privacy whatsoever, so we met in a private conference room at her job site. For another woman, she was teaching in another city and asked that I meet her at that particular site following her class. This worked very well and provided privacy, as well. Due to the subject matter and the intensity of some of the questions, it was imperative that I respected the women's need for privacy. For the focus group, a site was chosen that was in close proximity to all participants. It was held on a small college campus in a nearby city and was about the same distance for all of the participants. I suggested two different cities and several times and days of week. The majority of the women chose a Saturday and all chose this specific city. I made the arrangements to reserve the specific conference room on the university campus.

**Actors.** Participants for the study were female academics who were first-generation college graduates. The interpretation adopted by the United States Department of Education (2012) states that students are considered first generation if



neither parent graduated from a four-year college or university. No woman was excluded on the basis of demographic characteristics. In fact, my desire was to achieve diversity in the sample by including women of various ages, races, ethnicities and regional backgrounds. I did not, however, interview males for the study because of the nature of the study, since the topic was women's "lived experiences" as doctoral graduates (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727).

A pool of fifteen women who qualified as first-generation female graduates with a terminal degree was developed. The women were then invited to participate in the study. The cover letter explaining the research, a Demographic Questionnaire and a consent form were mailed to the potential participants. Ten women returned both the consent form and the Demographic Questionnaire and I began scheduling and holding interviews. To ensure diversity among the participants and to provide additional information about the women's current physical and professional location, the Demographic Questionnaire for Participant Recruitment and Selection (see Appendix A) was employed. The questions included: 1) name, 2) age, 3) race/ethnicity, 4) regional background, 5) socio-economic background, 6) degree-granting institution, 7) current institution (if applicable), 7) current position/job title, and 8) number of years in academia (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). By implementing the questionnaire, I was able to note the similarities and differences in the women's age, race/ethnicity, regional background and socio-economic background. Additional information was also provided in reference to the women's educational background, current position and number of years in academia. This information also assisted with member checking and was most useful in the reporting phase of data collection. For purposes of obtaining permission to conduct the study, I

submitted a request, which was approved, through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of my sponsored university.

**Events.** The interview process included both an individual and one subsequent focus group session. The voices of first-generation female doctoral students were archived for analysis. Voice is a struggle to figure out how to present the author's self, while simultaneously, writing the respondents' accounts and representing their selves. "Voice has multiple dimensions. First, there is the voice of the author. Second, there is the presentation of the voices of one's respondents within the next. A third dimension appears when the self is the subject of the inquiry" (Hertz, 1997, pp. 6-7). In the personal narrative, it is as important "to listen as to tell" (Miller, 2009, p. 71). Znanieski (1918) lays the groundwork for narrative inquiry. As researchers, we are on a quest to glean relevant information from interviewees. We are interested in the participants' "lived experiences" (biography), their place in the world being explored (sociological) and their journey (historical) and how their individual history ties in with the history of self and others" (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727). Needless to say, the personal narrative falls under the "auspices of narrative inquiry in which the researcher provides an opportunity for one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information is often retold or 'restored' by the researcher into a narrative chronology" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13).

Furthermore, what matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our

mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

It is imperative to gather as much information as one can about the “journey,” because the investigation of meanings of experiences are critical and at the forefront of the research. (Shope, 2006, p. 165). Since the title of my dissertation is “Finding Our Voices: The Bittersweet Journey of a Dream for First-Generation Female Doctoral Graduates,” I was inspired by a quote that I found which states, “When you are preparing for a journey, you own the journey. Once you’ve started the journey, the journey owns you” (Shope, 2006, p. 165). This is a critical reminder that the research is all consuming. Each notation and each thought are critical. These are all essential components of the narrative puzzle. According to Bell (1997), narrative inquiry allows researchers to realize that people’s lives are significant. Researchers must strive to understand the experiences of others. We must also consider the impact of the experience. As we interview, we must perfect our skill at obtaining information that the interviewees may not initially offer. In analyzing data, we are examining experiences and their impact on the stories that are told. It is also imperative to realize that, as our research unfolds, our understandings shift and change.

Qualitative researchers attend to the voices, the beautiful “noise,” which is a “manifest aspect of lived experience; and that qualitative research, in pursuit of sense through the medium of sound...questions put, opinions voiced, and conversations shared. . .can profitably attend to the noisiness of the everyday. The interview is the “sound of everyday life”. As qualitative researchers, especially as far as the interview is concerned, one must realize that interviews are an invitation for participants to resound

the “noise” or the voices of their lived experiences. Constructive “noise” and the interview go hand in hand (Hall, Lashua, & Coffey, 2008, pp. 1019-1023).

Finally, the personal narrative provides a stage where the story “lives on in the lives of all who have listened and read...there is no end to the story/telling...transporting stories across time and space inevitably changes them [readers/listeners/storytellers], yet key elements may emerge intact. . .each new telling is unique and part of what makes it so is the multitude of personal histories it has traversed” (Miller, 2009, p. 78).

Charmaz (2005) mentions the importance of gathering data, such as interviews, focus groups and subjectivity journal notes as the data inform the researcher. The subjectivity is a powerful piece of data and helps to ensure triangulation. By implementing the subjectivity journal, I was able to make connections between stories of the women, both negative and positive which helped ensure triangulation. Chase (2011) adds that moving beyond interviews usually requires rich transcripts and other document reviews such as subjectivity journal notes. Considering the feminist framework, it was imperative to emphasize the voices of women as they shared their individual journeys; therefore, data collection focused on interviews, a focus group and a subjectivity journal. The practices of qualitative research “turn the world into a series of representations, including subjectivity journal notes, interviews, conversations, transcripts, and memos to self. . . .We study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p.3).

Maxwell (2009) points out that interviews are necessary to glean information from the past. I implemented pre-established protocol to ensure the interviews provided

rich data for interpretation. Kvale (1996) also reminds us that most researchers approach interviewing as purposeful conversation. However, Brenner (2006) states that interviews are much more than a conversation. In the qualitative world, the emphasis of voice is essential. Research for women “should extend and amplify research merely about women, to ensure that even the most revealing descriptions of unknown or recognized aspects of women’s situations do not remain merely descriptions” (Olesen, 2005, p. 236). Therefore, I asked for clarification during the interviews and if the conversation moved too far from the question, I remained on guard to guide the participant back to the question. By conducting the interviews, focus groups and maintaining a subjectivity journal, common patterns were noted throughout the study.

“I did not enter the field to gather research data. I am in the field, as a member of the landscape” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). The landscape, in the case of each of the interviews, were locations chosen specifically by the participant. The interviews occurred at the women’s workplace, usually in her office. For one of the interviews, we started in a coffee shop and moved to her office due to the issue of privacy. I believe it is imperative that the participants feel at ease and comfortable and this promotes a stress-free environment for sharing personal stories or stories that are difficult to recall and/or tell.

Data are gathered with the researcher serving as one data source. Other critical data for narrative inquiry can come from a variety of sources; however, the interview is the most preferred manner of collecting data. In a world in which people embrace interviews in media, interviews remain at the top of the list of preferred data sources.

Chase (2005) states that interviews are living text where issues such as gender, race, class and power merge.

In this study, as I investigated the lived stories of ten first-generation women who navigated the higher education system from undergraduate to the doctorate level of study, the lived stories were, of course, enhanced by the personal narrative which is woven throughout the dissertation.

I entered their lives as academics and their lives as children, daughters, young adults, students, caregivers, and sisters. . . .They graciously agreed, and nothing has been the same since. They talked. We laughed. I remembered. Everyone cried. We all went home, all the way home, to our past, and worked to make collective meaning of the present. With each other's help, we came back, tired and different (Clark-Keefe, 2006, p. 1180).

Secondly, I incorporated a focus group. Six of the ten women attended and their identities remained private with the use of a numeral during the focus group process. Following the focus group interview, I matched the numeral to their assigned pseudonym. This further ensured confidentiality, as each woman was unaware of the identifiable pseudonym assigned to each woman for the purpose of the dissertation. Several options for times and dates were provided and the majority of the women favored a Saturday at ten AM. The focus group occurred in close proximity to all ten women on a neutral campus. The two-hour long conversation was guided by a Focus Group Script (see Appendix E) with me serving as the moderator. Another purpose of the focus group was to “reduce the distance between the researcher and the participant. The multivocality of

the participants limits the control of the researcher over the research process” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005c, p. 641). The focus group session also aided in story corroboration and accuracy of information. The women also used the time as an opportunity to co-construct meaning to events and memories of their specific journey. Additionally, I utilized a document review which included interview transcriptions, focus group transcriptions, and subjectivity journal excerpts (see Appendix F). Table 1 provides a detailed glimpse of the participant profiles for this study.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participant	Highest Degree	Age Race	Metaphor	**Socio- Economic Background	Job Title
*Elle	Ph.D.	45 White	Endless Knot	Middle	Professor
*Nikki	Ph.D.	43 White	Desert Flower	Lower- Middle	Professor
Lisa	Ph.D.	46 White	Clock	Working	Professor
Nora	Ed.D.	44 White	Starfish	Middle	Central Office Administrator
*Rose	Ed.D.	49 Native American/ White	Butterfly	Middle	Central Office Administrator
*Sandy	Ed.D.	40 White	Coffee Cup	Middle- Upper	Professor
*Elizabeth	Ed.D.	58 White	Weathervane	Working	Central Office Administrator
*Claire	Ed.D.	58 African- American	Loblolly Pine	Working	Central Office Administrator
Monica	Ed.D.	59 White	Sailboat	Middle	Regional Curriculum Coordinator
Kaeti	Ph.D.	44 White	Rocking Chair	Lower- Middle	Professor

\*Participant attended both Individual Interview **and** Focus Group

\*\*Socio-economic background as reported by participant on *Demographic Questionnaire*



**Process.** Feminist qualitative research exhibits “a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, a high degree of reciprocity on the part of the interviewer, the perspective of the women being interviewed, and a non-hierarchical relationship” (Oakley, 1981, p. 707). The interview is a conversation and includes the art of asking questions and listening. It is not a neutral tool, for at least two people create the reality of the interview situation. In this situation, planned questions are asked and answers are given. Thus, the interview produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes. Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) state that this method is influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer, including race, class, ethnicity, and gender. This statement characterizes the interaction during the interview process and clarifies the role of the researcher as listener and the participant as speaker.

Glesne (2011) also points out that the timing should be not only convenient to the researcher but also convenient to the participants. Since it was imperative to offer an opportunity for each participant to have ample time to discuss her experiences along the way through college, post-baccalaureate work and through the doctorate as a first-generation female graduate, one two-hour session was scheduled; however, this was dependent upon the completion of the session and/or the cooperation of the participants. Once the interviews were complete, the participants were invited to participate in a focus group which lasted two hours. All information, from both the interviews and the focus group session, were recorded using handwritten scripted notes and a digital recorder. During the research process, I asked questions for which there were no right or wrong answers. Each woman was assured that, as with any study, there was a slight risk that she might have recalled difficulties or unpleasant memories related to her experiences. Each

woman was also assured that she could have chosen not to participate at any time during the interview and/or focus group process. While participating in this study, I reminded the participants that they might provide a voice to some issues from their past and/or present which were difficult to recollect. I also assured the women that their identities would be protected with an assigned pseudonym. Additionally, I assured the women that I would not reveal their identities. To further ensure confidentiality, I transcribed the recording, and all notes will continue to remain confidential. The notes and recordings remained secure during the study and will continue to remain secure following the study for a duration of ten years. At no time was the participant's image photographed or videotaped. Documents developed from the transcripts do not contain identifiable information and will only be shared as part of the partial requirements for the doctoral program.

During the interviews, it was imperative that I continue to build trust and maintain a calming and non-stressful environment. I remained attentive during the interviews as I was asking questions, listening and prompting for elaboration. "Knowledge and understanding are the fruits of the labor. . . .The interview produces knowledge and understandings" (Chase, 2005, p. 651). These understandings are enhanced by the "lived experiences" of the interviewer (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher involved a level of human interaction and human relationship that, at times, felt "uncomfortable and messy" (Connolly, 2007, p. 453). It was essential that I, the researcher, remained "transparent" in order to create a bridge [connection] between the researcher and the participant (Trahar, 2009, p. 6). Kvale

(1996) states that the successful researcher and interviewer should be knowledgeable and familiar with the purpose and protocol of the interview. I allowed time during the interview process for the interviewees to think, pause during a response and complete all answers. Steering the conversations was a critical skill of mine and allowed me to guide the participants to stay on task. In the case of inconsistencies of information, I was prepared to clarify what was said, if needed. Connecting the responses throughout the interview was also key in order to clarify and tie the information together. I digitally recorded the interviews and focus group while also taking notes. Thus, I was able to ensure there was no problem recollecting what had been said during the process of the interview. As needed, I clarified and extended the meanings of the responses, without imposing my own meaning on the data.

As the researcher, I am a first-generation female doctoral student who has journeyed through undergraduate, post-baccalaureate and doctoral studies. I was called upon to hold the data close, as a basketweaver preparing for the marketplace. Issues that might arise in a qualitative study are “influenced by the role of the interviewer vis-à-vis informants, as well as consideration of the potential power relations between researchers and informants” (Brenner, 2006, p. 361). My role in the research is best summarized as a “maker of quilts or . . . one who assembles images into montages” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. 4). I, as a craftswoman, used the “aesthetic and material tools of my craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, and empirical materials were at hand” (Becker, 1998, p. 2).

For the purpose of triangulation, I implemented subjectivity journal excerpts (see Appendix F). These journal excerpts also provided a tool for me, as the researcher, to

step aside from the research and reflect on my own journey. The subjectivity journal was an opportunity for me to gather my thoughts and reactions to the interview or the focus group. It began as an actual journal and evolved into sheets of paper and memos to self. Thoughts would enter my mind in the middle of the night and I kept a small memo pad by my bed to record these thoughts. I referred to these thoughts as “asides” (St. Pierre, 1995, p. 38). Those memos were thoughts about thoughts, questions about questions, questions about responses, comments about responses and responses about responses. The Subjectivity Journal was all-encompassing. It served as a listening ear, an eye for the not-so-obvious, and a voice when I was indeed, speechless. Sometimes, the memos appeared as scribbles on a napkin or a receipt. Sometimes, they appeared neatly written between lines and sometimes they were sideways words that only I could understand. Then, I would take the time to either hand-write or attach those into the Subjectivity Journal. One surprise with the subjectivity journal was the fact that I was relieved to have the option to write, at times. I had no other outlet to speak my mind. I could not share the private details of the interview, due to confidentiality, but I could write. And, write I did.

The methodological bricoleur is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, ranging from interviewing to intensive self-reflection and introspection. The theoretical bricoleur reads widely and is knowledgeable about the many interpretive paradigms that can be brought to any particular problem. . . .The interpretive bricoleur understands that research is an interactive process shaped by her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the

people in the setting. The narrative bricoleur also knows that researchers all tell stories about the worlds they have studied. Thus, the narratives, or stories, scientists tell are accounts couched and framed within specific storytelling traditions, often defined as paradigms (feminism/constructivism). The product of the interpretive bricoleur's labor is a complex, quilt-like bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage, a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations. This interpretive structure is like a quilt-connecting the parts to the whole (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, pp. 5-6).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Denzin and Lincoln (1997) refer to the feminist ethic as a situation where the interviewer and the interviewee are on the same level in the telling of shared stories. The two share a common bond, thread, or experience. Since the two should be considered equals, it is critical that the interviewer be careful with relationships of power. Young (1997) disputed the claim and touted this symmetrical relationship as undesirable and, certainly, unattainable.

Concerning the feminist "interviewing ethic, the interviewer and respondents become coequals who are carrying on a conversation about mutually relevant, often biographical, issues" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005c, p. 643). As always, when humans are involved, there are ethical considerations. With this particular research topic, there is a slight risk that the participant might recall difficult or unpleasant memories related to her experiences. While participating in this study, the participant may have provided a voice to some issues from her past and/or present which were difficult to recollect. Therefore,

throughout the process, I continued to encourage voice. In some situations, participants were hesitant to fully render voice. At these moments, I continued to encourage the women to “overcome the silences or failings that interfere with the achievement of ‘full’ voice; put the subject at her ease; make the interview feel like a conversation; ‘triangulate’ accounts to check for truth or validity” (MacLure, 2009, p. 101).

Additionally,

Subjects might always have said something more, or something else, or something deeper, or something more true; If they had felt more at ease; If they had been more honest; If the researcher had asked better questions; Or had refrained from asking so many questions; Or had ‘shared’ more of herself; Or interjected less of herself; If the interview had been held in a less public place; Or a more public place; If it had taken place in a group or had not taken place in a group; If subject and researcher had been of the same sex, or age, or ethnicity, and so on. It is the task of Method to supplement the insufficiencies of voice; To restore it to what it should have been; The individual participants will be assured that she will be the only person, other than herself, who will know that she is participating in the study (MacLure, 2009, p. 101).

Stringer (2008) points out several additional procedures which must be adhered to in any research study. They include: confidentiality, permission, and informed consent. Confidentiality was embraced throughout the study. In response to these considerations, I assured each participant that her identity would continue to be protected with an assigned pseudonym and that all digital recordings would be transcribed by me and the

notes would remain confidential. The notes and recordings remained secure during the study and will continue to remain secure for a period of ten years. Documents developed from the transcripts do not contain identifiable information and will only be shared as part of the partial requirements for the doctoral program. Since no photography or interviewing of children took place, there was no need to grant permission by parents and since this study focused on adults, permission was not necessary, but consent was distributed as part of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol.

### **Reflexivity**

I believe I am more empathetic, than most, toward first-generation female students because of my connections to the topic of the research and my own perspectives to my personal journey. I am not certain this is a bias, but I am sure it could be construed as a bias by some in the research community. The data were solely the responses of the participants and not my own, as the patterns and themes emerged, shifted and changed. It was also important that the interview and focus group protocol aligned with the research questions. However, this alignment did not create pre-conceived notions of the final themes. The coding of the data and noting of common patterns throughout both created a vehicle for trustworthy research.

Furthermore,

Objectivity as freedom from bias refers to reliable knowledge, checked and controlled, undistorted by personal bias and prejudice. Such a commonsense conception of objective as being free of bias implies doing good, solid, craftsman-like research, producing knowledge that has been systematically cross-checked and verified. In principle, the interview can

be an objective research method in the sense of being unbiased (Kvale, 1996, p. 64).

Since triangulation is imperative in ensuring validity in a qualitative study, the following data collection procedures were employed in order to appropriately study and glean significant information from the study: 1) individual interviews, 2) focus group, and 3) document review. The document review included the transcripts and subjectivity journal notes. Reinharz (1992) points out that feminism, as a perspective, enjoys highlighting human diversity and frequently includes the perspective of the fieldworker as a source of data and employs interactive research. The Subjectivity Journal allowed me to take a step back each time following the interviews and focus group to gather my thoughts, analyze quotes and provide a subjective reflection. This process was critical to triangulation. Additionally, the implementation of the focus group ensured member-checking and corroboration of stories.

### **Validity**

Validity is of the utmost importance in the realm of qualitative research and, more importantly, within the realms of narrative inquiry, due to the subjective nature of qualitative research. In order to ensure validity within the study, multiple strategies were implemented: 1) triangulation of data, 2) corroboration between interview and focus group, 3) intensive and verbatim interviews, 4) close proximity between the researcher and the data by personally completing interviews and transcriptions, 5) presentation of both positive and negative information, 6) pre-determined set of protocol, and 7) prolonged time in the field.



**Triangulation.** A method for ensuring validity throughout the study was established by implementing triangulation. Triangulation is defined as “the use of multiple and different perspectives to corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research problem and its outcomes” (Stringer, 2008, p. 49). For this study, I ensured triangulation by implementing interviews, a focus group and maintaining a subjectivity journal. Triangulation itself does not ensure validity; however, the evidences do ensure validity. The combination of multiple “practices. . .perspectives. . .in a study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry” (Flick, 2002, p. 229). Richardson (2000) recommends researchers think of a crystal, rather than a triangle, in interpreting and validating research. They point out that “like crystals. . .the pieces of the quilt. . .combine symmetry and substance with infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations. . . .Crystals grow, change, alter. . . .Crystals are prisms that reflect. . .and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934).

According to Maxwell (2009), since the research process included a duration of several months and ten participants, this lengthy process served as an integral part of the study, and therefore, assisted with ensuring validity. Each personal story was unique and, by providing a predetermined set of protocols (see Appendix D), I avoided leading questions. Maxwell (2009) also notes that intensive interviews enable one to collect rich data. The richness of the data collected continued to be magnified by the verbatim accounts of each woman, and the data also provided a detailed and varied account of the individual journeys of the women interviewed. I transcribed the verbatim interviews to ensure authenticity. By personally transcribing the data, I further enhanced the richness of

the study and avoided issues with remembering what each participant said. I knew for sure that this rich form of data accurately represented the participants' responses. As the researcher, it was imperative that I avoided predicting results throughout the duration of the data collection process.

**Trustworthiness.** Polkinghorne (2007) points out the fact that the researcher's primary responsibility is not to determine if stories are accurate snapshots of events which occurred, but better to grasp the meanings attached to those events. Additionally, stories that "diverge from establishing 'truth' can sometimes be the most interesting, indicating silenced voices and subjugated knowledge" (Riessman, 2008, p. 186). Narrative research allows for the study of "people's lives as lived and people whose life experience has been lost in the search for central tendencies" (Josselson, 2007, p. 8). Researchers must keep in mind that narrative inquiry reveals, in most cases, "experiences and meanings that have not previously been exposed by other types of research. . . . Narrative researchers must present careful evidence for their claims from narrators' accounts" (Riessman, 2008, p. 186).

When considering trustworthiness, the researcher must view the results in relation to the way others "construct their social world so that I may trust myself in acting on their implications. . . . More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 178)?

**Credibility.** Since interview responses are subjective in nature, I remained on guard to ensure accuracy with reporting of data. Carspecken (1996) states the importance of checking frequently for consistency and accuracy. As the researcher, I was obligated to the credibility of the findings by "ensuring that research was carried out according to

the canons of good practice and submitting research findings to the members of the social world who were studied for confirmation that the investigator had correctly understood that social world” (Bryman, 2004, p. 274-275). This latter technique is known as respondent validation or member validation. The focus group and subjectivity journal assisted with member checking. The individual interviews had occurred, subjectivity notes had been taken, interview recordings had been transcribed, the focus group had met, the recording had been transcribed and the raw data from the transcripts had been read several times. By completing these tasks, I ensured the women’s stories were authenticated for consistency and accuracy. Triangulation was ensured as multiple data sources were implemented.

**Transferability.** This refers to the “extent to which the results can be transferred to other settings” (Lichtman, 2010). It was imperative that the study maintained transferability which parallels external validity in quantitative research. The findings also transferred to other contexts because I ensured the participants were from a variety of backgrounds, professions and settings. The ten participants represented a diverse group of women from various occupations and walks of life. Some of the participants were natives of other states or had lived in various parts of the United States.

**Dependability.** This is also critical to the qualitative study and “emphasizes the need for me to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs” (Lichtman, 2010). Stringer (2008) points out the importance of a participant debriefing to explain the purpose and nature of the study. By providing an Institutional Review Board (IRB) detailed consent form, which outlined the research, and ensuring participants understood the process, the researcher further ensured dependability.

**Confirmability.** This relates to the degree to which results may be confirmed or corroborated by others (Lichtman, 2010). By allowing the women to speak about their experiences, both separately and collaboratively, I was able to ensure confirmability. During the focus group, the women's discussions flowed freely, and they corroborated stories which were told during the interview process. For women who had a tendency to restrain from divulging excessive information, I provided a natural opportunity for open contributions to the conversation. The focus group was an essential part of the research and provided the opportunity for the women to share and corroborate their memories and stories.

Table 2 provides the reader with a glimpse of the total research puzzle. The pieces fell into place as the stories were told, collected and analyzed. No piece was more important than any other, and all pieces worked together to provide an ultimate crosswalk to the final stage of analysis.

Table 2: Dissertation Crosswalk

Questions	Data Sources	Analysis	Timeline
What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies?	Interview Transcriptions Focus Group Transcriptions Subjectivity Journal	Use of questioning Analysis of words and phrases Inductive thematic analysis	May-September, 2012
How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate?	Interview Transcriptions Focus Group Transcriptions Subjectivity Journal	Use of questioning Analysis of words and phrases Inductive thematic analysis	May-September, 2012
What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education?	Interview Transcriptions Focus Group Transcriptions Subjectivity Journal	Use of questioning Analysis of words and phrases Inductive thematic analysis	May-September, 2012

Adapted from Smith (1999)

The following chapter provides a description of the research findings. The sections are divided by each participant's pseudonym. In each section, the stories from the personal interview and the focus group are reported. The Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) will be introduced with a metaphorical quilt square implemented to symbolically represent each woman's bittersweet journey. In Chapter 5, an analysis of four significant themes will provide a detailed response to each research questions.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

The purpose of this dissertation was to study the journeys of ten first-generation female doctoral graduates. The following research questions, as implemented in research by Jackson and Mazzei (2012) guided the study and provided insight into the life events/experiences, decisions, and persistence of the women in higher education:

1. What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies?
2. How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate?
3. What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education?

The ten women, as described in detail in this chapter, are first-generation female doctoral graduates. They have journeyed through undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs of study and have all received a terminal degree. Network sampling was implemented as women who knew other women recommended others as possible participants in the study. From these suggestions, a pool of possible participants was developed. Once the pool of women was established, ten women were invited to participate in both an interview and a focus group session. A cover letter explaining the research study and a consent form were sent by postal mail to ensure the women were aware of the purpose of the research, and written consent was given by each participant.

For the purpose of establishing a diverse group, a Demographic Questionnaire (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) was used. During the interview, research protocols (see Appendix D) were used. The same ten women were invited back for a focus group session at a convenient location for all participants. Once again, pre-determined questions were established as protocols to guide the conversation. Guidelines for the focus group conversations were pre-established protocol and were maintained throughout the duration of the focus group (see Appendix E). For the interviews, ten women participated (see Appendix G). The same ten women were invited to the focus group, and six participated in the culminating focus group session (see Table 1).

In this chapter, a detailed introduction to each of the ten women participants will be provided. For the purpose of confidentiality, each woman was assigned a pseudonym. Since the study's title is "The Bittersweet Journey of a Dream: Finding our Voices as First-Generation Female Doctoral Graduates," the metaphor of the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) is utilized throughout the making of the quilt story.

"The squares of the quilt each represent a story. The quilter stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together. This process creates and brings psychological and emotional unity. . . a pattern. . . to an interpretive experience. . . Many different things are going on at the same time. . . different voices, different perspectives, points of views, angles of vision" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. 5).

### **Description of the Findings**

Wolcott (1994) provides ten examples for describing the data: 1) chronological order, 2) researcher as narrator, 3) progressive focusing, 4) day-in-the-life, 5) critical or key event, 6) plot and characters, 7) groups in interaction, 8) follow an analytical



framework, 9) the Rashoman effect and 10) write a mystery (Wolcott, 1994, pp. 17-23). For the purpose of this study, the findings will be described on a case-by-case basis with an emphasis on “researcher or narrator order” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 18). The quote below summarizes my efforts.

Having notes. . .all neatly bound, all stored safe and sound. . .is  
one thing; it validates our anthropological communications.  
But using notes is quite another: that activity shows fieldnotes  
to be not a fixed repository of data from the field but a  
reinterpretable and contradictory patchwork of perspectives (Lederman,  
1990, p. 90).

Additionally, for the purpose of symbolizing each woman’s voice, the metaphor of the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) was employed. The quilt exhibits ten squares, and each square symbolically represents each woman. For each of the participants, a metaphor was utilized to symbolize each woman’s journey, strength and the uniqueness of her story.

Feminists demonstrate creativity in the choice of metaphors to  
characterize research. Feminist research is amoeba-like; it goes  
everywhere, in every direction. It reaches into all disciplines and  
uses all the methods, sometimes singly and sometimes in  
combination. . .in turn. . .is fed by women’s. . .hope (Reinharz, 1992, p.  
243)

Freeman (2006) reminds us of the sheer value of the data in that they provide permission for the researcher to distance herself and be given an opportunity to reflect on

significant life events. Researchers also value interviews for the “window. . .a frequently used metaphor they offer to the narrative environment external to the interview” (Chase, 2011, p. 424).

This is a window “to the soul, if you will. . . .But the metaphor of the window also indicates its limits. Looking out at narrative environment from inside the narrative, the narrative as a window limits how and how much of the narrative environment can be seen” (Chase, 2011, p. 424-425).

As the researcher pours over every word on the page, she must embrace both the text and her honesty.

In the end, you must take me at my word, and whether and how you do that is undoubtedly beyond my control. I gave it my best, since I cared immeasurably for the women’s stories. I found my own validity when I wrote and cried and then wrote some more. As the bones of my soul broke ground for my intellect, I pushed through into spaces of understanding I did not particularly want or plan to occupy. Why did the tears come? My posture as academic researcher and writer was jolted and deflated and displaced by connections and thoughts and folds erased from awareness until they were worded (St. Pierre, 1995, p. 114 ).

Based on the work of Ross (2011), the overall metaphor of the quilt is symbolic of the women’s stories. Each square on the quilt depicts a pictorial metaphor that is symbolic of each woman and her journey. Smith (1999) points out that the use of literary devices or metaphors, in this case, is sometimes an essential element in weaving the

narrative. Additionally, the ten metaphors, or quilt squares, collectively join to create the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G), which is symbolic of the individual interviews and the unity of the focus group session.

**Elle's quilt square.** The first woman interviewed, Elle, represents the twelfth square on the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G), which exhibits a pictorial display of an endless knot, symbolic for lifelong learning and knowledge. Elle, a forty-five year old mathematics professor, teaches at a small community college in the eastern United States. She, her husband, and their two children reside in close proximity to both sides of the family. Her beginnings at the university occurred in late high school as she began enrolling in calculus, history and English courses at the college level. As a non-traditional student, Elle experienced many issues as she began to navigate the system of higher education. Elle credits guidance counselors as the main reason she pursued a degree in higher education. She added,

I'm amazed that I knew to go and do all of this! I had really good guidance counselors in high school to tell me to do this and that. They would tell me to apply here and go there. I just sort of lucked into it because I didn't have a family to know to do that. It was my guidance counselors that recognized to know that I had that kind of ability and then my mom would say, "You know, you can be whatever you want to be." She would support me, but she didn't really know how. She would just give me that support. So, I was very lucky, but I'm trying to foster that in my children and encourage them to do that.

During the focus group session, Elle further elaborated on the issues with navigating the university systems, such as financial aid. She said,

My parents encouraged me to apply for scholarships, so I applied for lots of scholarships. I had a full scholarship to college, but they didn't know how to go to college. So, I went to college not knowing how to register and move in. I went to college as a sophomore in high school. So, I missed freshmen orientation. Orientation was not part of my experience, and I can remember sitting in the middle of the gym when we had to register for math and then you had to register for English and you had to register for psychology, all separately. I missed all of my classes and I was just sitting in the middle of the gym and crying. I missed all of my courses. It was a disaster and I didn't have any help. Then, only, because I had a family friend working at the university did I have any courses my freshman year. I didn't have any help from my parents because they didn't know how the university worked. We didn't know that you're supposed to pre-register. It didn't cross any of our minds because we didn't know to do that.

Another major issue that occurred early on in her journey involved housing. Elle began, The first difficult experience I had at the university was when they wanted me to live in the honors dorm. I didn't really feel like honors material. I thought the honors students were coming from urban areas, and I was certain they weren't coming from my little hometown. I would have nothing in common with people in an honors dorm, and I wouldn't live there. I was in the honors program and had a full honors scholarship. But, I chose the regular dorm.

As Elle shared about this part of her journey, tears began to well up in her eyes. She paused and then continued,

That's painful. I had the strangest roommates. They were terrible. I should've lived in the honors dorm. I had much more in common with them. My roommate would get drunk all of the time, and she would go out and do all of these drugs and then she would call me because she was lost. Then, I would have to go pick her up in the snow. I would stay up really late and do homework, because I was taking eighteen to twenty-one hours credit. I wanted to graduate in three years. I had plans. She didn't have any plans. I should have lived in the honors dorm. It turned out I had way more in common with the honors students because they were in my classes. My roommates were a disaster. So, I got married at nineteen, and I got a good roommate.

Elle experienced another negative incident which occurred during her first semester. She elaborated,

As an initial computer science major, my first computer science teacher threw me out of class. He asked the class, "Who in here knows Pascal?" I responded, "I know Pascal!" Then, he pointed and said, "You, out!" He scratched my name off the roll. I said, "Wait! I don't know how to program Pascal on a mainframe. I know Apple Pascal." He replied, "That's ok. You will figure it out!" He just threw me out. So I had to take Pascal as an independent study which is not the way to start out being a computer science major. His excuse. . . .He needed to make his classes smaller. I also had a computer science scholarship. I thought I was really good at computer science. But, I wasn't good enough to teach yourself to program on a mainframe. It's a wonder I did not drop out at that point in time.

In addition to Elle's husband, who encouraged her to continue attending the university, she also had established a strong relationship with a nurturing professor who encouraged her along the journey. This professor became a role model and mentor to her. She understood the complicated process of attending the university as a first-generation female college student. She continued,

Once I completed the Bachelor's degree, she encouraged me to go on and get my master's degree, and we are still very good friends today and do research together and write together. She is amazing! At first, I just planned to go and get a four-year degree, and then she convinced me to get a master's degree. She urged me to go because I would have more opportunities, make more money and make more of a difference.

When asked about the pleasurable experiences at the university, she quickly reflected on positive bonding within her major department and offered,

As it turned out, I loved my math classes, and that was a big surprise. We would have big study groups at the local pizza restaurant and watch hockey and do math. We also had every Tuesday night at a local Tex-Mex restaurant with the math department, and that was great.

For Elle, issues occurred with immediate family, as well. She continued,

My brother dropped out of college, which causes lots of tensions in my family. He wants to believe that I think I am better than they are because I went to college and he didn't. His wife wants to think that my parents think more highly of me than they do of him. They think what I do is more important than what he does. He's a musician. Holidays are particularly a train wreck at my parent's house,

and now my nephew has also dropped out of college and my parents will say things like, “Now are you going to register again this semester?” Or they will look at me and ask, “Well, why don’t you encourage him to go to college?” The whole college thing is problematic. It’s a huge center of tension. When I went to the university, I felt like I fit in more so there, than with my own brother, because I never fit into the rock band culture.

As Elle continued to reflect, she shifted her conversation to how her journey has impacted family members in a positive way. She added,

My daughter already says when people ask, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” She replies, “I am going to be a science professor and work at the university.” When they ask my son what he wants to be, he replies, “I want to be a robotics engineer, and I am planning to get my Ph.D. at Cornell.” I’m talking to them about the kinds of scholarships they need. We talk about community and school service. They both make straight A’s in school. They’ve never made a B. So, I think they look at me as a role model, and I think that’s really awesome.

The endless knot is symbolic of life-long learning. Elle certainly enjoys learning. She also enjoys teaching, building relationships and collaborating within the realm of higher education. However, one can also glean from Elle’s story that issues with family and the university were constant. The issues described here include the lack of family support, the lack of an undergraduate advisor, the lack of proper orientation for a first-generation female student, the overwhelming nature of registration and the lack of guidance in choosing appropriate housing for an honors student, such as she. However, Elle was able to overcome these obstacles and seek out her own advisor, a professor within her major

department. The math department, itself, created a solace for her as the group connected and met several times per week to study and reflect together. The endless knot continues to be a symbol throughout Elle's journey as she realizes the impact the terminal degree has had on her life and the lives of her children.

**Nikki's quilt square.** On the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G), the seventh quilt square depicts a lovely, yet isolated, flower growing in the middle of a desert. The second woman I interviewed reminded me of the Desert Star flower which flourishes in the sand. Its flower is white and star-shaped with a yellow center. The foliage is green and shiny, and the stems are thick. The leaves and flower have a thick, sponge-like appearance. All of these attributes are critical to the survival of the flower in harsh conditions. Like the Desert Star, Nikki has overcome tremendous obstacles to become the successful forty-three year-old professor she is today. Nikki serves as professor of education at a large university in the southeastern United States. She is married and the mother of two children. Nikki's father was a truck driver, and her mother was pregnant with her while in high school. As Nikki reflected on her own viewpoints, she considers herself a moderate Christian whose faith is very important to her. Nikki certainly experienced issues in her educational and family environment. When asked about tensions, she responded that she could certainly relate to cognitive dissonance both in her educational environment and in her upbringing. This dissonance existed in the very fibers of her being. She described herself as not knowing exactly where she fit. This tension, or dissonance, if you will, was initiated between her parents and her. Poverty was real for Nikki. She remembers the first home as being the dirt floor basement of the store that her grandparents owned. She elaborated,



My father was the black sheep in his family, so I wasn't that close to his family. I am not really close to either side of my family, and they don't like that very much. They think I am a mystery and I am a bit of an introvert. I get my energy from being by myself. I have some difficult things in my past and in my upbringing, but I don't blame anyone. I think, instead of blaming, or feeling mad or upset, we should just look at it as a circumstance. Think about it as a moment in time. I think that has actually been very helpful. I do think about it, but I also sometimes just don't think about it. I think about it as the past is the past. We can't change the past. I was first-generation, and my parents, though they had not gone to college, were always very supportive. They really wanted me to go. They understood that was something they wanted for me.

Nikki also felt a deep drive to pursue her studies at the university. She remembers her high school English teacher had a Ph.D. and she didn't even know what Ph.D. stood for, but she decided that very day that she would, someday, have a Ph.D. also. She also stated that she never wondered if she would go to college. She applied for and was awarded an esteemed university scholarship. During the focus group session, Nikki emphasized her gratitude to building relationships with key people, such as teachers. She stated,

Teachers were so critical to my success, if that's what you would call it. They had such a belief in me and saw in me things that I didn't see. They worked to cull it out. I always pay tribute to the teachers that I had in high school. On occasion, when I've had an opportunity to give speeches and keynotes, I always recognize them. I feel like they changed the course of my life. This is where I would say, I had great high school teachers in a place where you might not expect

to find them. They were little diamonds in the rough, and I had a senior teacher who had her Ph.D. in English from Duke and I knew that; however, I really didn't know what Ph.D. even stood for. I knew she was the smartest person I knew, or I felt she was the smartest person I knew, but she made me and my classmates feel like we were really smart and could do anything. Then, if you fast forward a long time, I went back to teach with her before she retired. That was such a great honor. I love her very much still, but she wasn't all warm and fuzzy; however, she was just a strong woman, and I feel she was a role model for me and gave me some tough criticism. I always knew her motivation was good. She believed I could be excellent. She pushed me in that way, and I had other teachers who also did that. At the undergraduate degree, I think I was vicariously living my dad's dream. He wanted to go to college and, just through a variety of circumstances, he actually completed his degree after I completed my degrees. And, just as a little piece of trivia, my husband, who finished the two-year degree twenty-six years ago, is an undergraduate student now. I could get into all kinds of obstacles about that in raising kids. I also have the perspective of knowing something he doesn't know, and that is how valuable I think that will be for our family later. His parents encouraged him to drop out of high school, which he didn't do. They had a similar background to what Elizabeth (p. 114) was saying about the furniture industry and the thinking, "Wasn't that good enough?" I think I've got some grit. I also think there were people who thought I might not do it and so, "Dang it, I was going to!"

During the focus group, Nikki reiterated the importance of building relationships with those teacher mentors and role models in her life. She continued,

I already mentioned how important my high school teachers have been in my life. Later, I read a letter that one of them wrote when I was on a scholarship committee for another student. It wasn't until that moment that I realized she had probably written a letter like that for me. I don't think until that moment that I realized that many teachers and counselors spent a lot of time on my scholarship applications. It just didn't dawn on me. I remember going home that night after reading that beautiful letter, and this young person got the scholarship. Certainly, the student had her own merit, but that letter was really critical to the student getting the scholarship. I went home that night and called her to say that when I was eighteen, I had no idea to even say thank you. I explained that I had just read a letter that she had written and it was so beautiful. I couldn't imagine all the time she had taken in her life to invest in ours. I wanted to thank her for that because it changed my life. In my job, I do a lot of writing. In writing things, I sometimes have an opportunity to publish a note of gratitude and I, like Claire (p. 134), have so many people to owe for the good things in my life. It's kind of hard to say sometimes. So, just a note on something I can send them that has been published somewhere has meant a lot to them and a lot to me. I have lots of them and then, in my particular field, I had an opportunity for several years to interview all the founders and prominent leaders in this field who all became mentors of mine. That book and my interactions with them have just been so meaningful. Again, I

don't even know how to capture the investment people have made into my life, except to try to pay it forward into the lives of others.

Nikki described herself as someone who had difficulty fitting in at the undergraduate level. She was able to attend the university with a full academic scholarship. She indicated that it was at the university where she first encountered tensions. However, she astutely remembers the day she met her roommate and the bond they shared. She described that day as “a glimmer.” Even though the two were from very diverse backgrounds, she made a connection with this young Indian lady, a devout Hindu. She continued to elaborate that she really didn't know what being a Hindu meant; however, she was ecstatic that both she and her roommate shared the same moral values. They spent many hours discussing family, and she credits her roommate for teaching her much about life.

We could be really honest with one another, and so I went to the Diwali, their New Year's kind of celebration. Her mom wanted me to wear a Sari, which is maybe a six-yard piece of cloth and a blouse. I wore a Punjabi dress and a Pottu on my forehead. And, I probably did not blend in that well, but they were very accepting of me. So, while I experienced a tension overall, the university was a more promiscuous place than I, but I had a safety in my roommate. We took care of one another and so, we had that safe place to process things and that was good. I continued to grapple with it [the tension] and to grow and evolve. I would say that I am more confident now in whom I am than when I first went to the university.

During the focus group interview, Nikki also continued to elaborate on her feelings of not fitting in. She continued,

My experience was such, that even though neither parent attended college and only one graduated high school, there was no doubt that I would go to college. That was never a question, but similarly we didn't know how to negotiate that. However, I had really excellent teachers and guidance counselors who obviously had been to college. In a way, it was a benefit because everyone in my high school was kind of financially needy. I think they were used to people needing help. If anyone was going to go to college, that was kind of the measure of success of the high school. We were going to need financial help. I applied for fifty-three scholarships on an electric typewriter, and I got some assistance. The guidance counselors would always make sure that I had applications and I did get a scholarship. I recall the day that we knew we would get the call with a "Yes" or "No" about this scholarship that my parents were so excited.

Nikki remembers the promise of a potential sixteen-thousand dollars and getting that call. It was just about enough to pay for college. When they received the call that she got the scholarship, she remembers her father getting out the phone book and going through it and calling people, as though they had won the lottery or something.

She continued,

So, they were happy to be helped. They understood college was going to be so expensive. They were going to do whatever they needed to do, financially, to help me. Fortunately, it didn't come to selling the house or whatever they might have done. Definitely, the orientation to college and college life was not so

smooth, and I felt like everyone was wealthy there. I am sure that wasn't true. It was more cultural. I felt like I have a fairly good academic foundation, though it wasn't easy. College wasn't easy, and I had always worked a job while I was in high school. I don't know. It's just hard to spend eighteen hours a day studying. I was an English major, and they said, "You have four days to read *Moby Dick*," and that part was very difficult. I felt like other people were more equipped, which might have been my own illusion.

In continuing to elaborate on the issues at the university, Nikki stated that the majority of her friends were back home. She described her loneliness at the university. She also talked about the volume of reading and studying that was required of her. She felt that she didn't know how to manage expectations very well. She continued,

I met the person who is my husband now when I was just seventeen, so I was dating him during my undergraduate experience. My church family was also back in my hometown, and I didn't really allow myself to become a part of the community back at the university until my last year there. I graduated in three years, and during my last year I started being a part of the Baptist Student Union. They had a place on campus and you could go there and study and people would make meals, but I didn't get into the whole meal thing. I did find a place where some of the people were a lot like me. However, I did not enjoy my undergraduate experience, really at all.

Nikki described her life as an undergraduate student as an endurance test. However, the highlights of her university experience were the relationships and connections she made. She continued,

Like I said, it was great to meet my roommate, and I made a few other friends whom I have not kept in touch with. I know there were people who loved being at the university and they loved being an undergraduate, but I did not. I felt lost. I continued my education closer to home and worked toward a master's degree in curriculum. I enjoyed that a lot. It felt very relevant to what I was doing as a teacher. In undergraduate, almost all of my courses were content. At the master's level, we really looked at curriculum and pedagogy and characteristics of students and how to meet their needs, and so it just felt so much more relevant, and that was really pleasant. I remember those experiences fondly.

As a university professor, Nikki described her first three years as rough. However, she was quick to point out the importance of building relationships and making connections with students, faculty and staff. She elaborated,

I would say after the third year, it's been mostly great. I've had some amazing students through the years whom I still keep in touch with. The university environment allows you to do a lot of different things. So you can work on being a great teacher. You can work on being a great researcher or scholar. You are in an environment that is constantly stimulating. You are in an environment where you don't have to feel threatened about your own identity. I think some of those threats and tensions earlier were self-imposed, and I like for people to question things. I like to be a party to that. I have an amazing mentor at the university where I teach, and I would have to say it has been a great gift and privilege to work with him all these years, and I will continue to work with him as a mentor and as an authority figure. That has just been a great, great gift. I would just say

the students that I have worked with and their sharing of stories have been a joy. When you go to a conference and people come up and want to tell you what's going on, and they know it is in line with something they learned in your course or program. That's been a great, pleasurable experience for me.

During the focus group, when speaking about issues of self-confidence and the culture of the university, Nikki shared,

I remember being in my job and a couple of you have alluded to it, but it's called the Imposter Syndrome. You know, you're doing your job and somebody might show up at the door and say, "I'm sorry, but we've made a mistake. You weren't supposed to get a Ph.D. Clearly, you are not good enough to do that." I remember feeling, at times, just a little bit paralyzed by that and feeling, "Who am I?" So, that continues, every now and then, to be on my shoulder whispering in my ear. "You're not supposed to be here." It helps others understand there is a phenomenon that exists. Somebody has named it, and it's a common experience for people for a variety of reasons. I would say, just that whole notion about that dark cloud, the Imposter Syndrome, has taken me a few years to overcome.

When asked about changes in her life since earning a doctoral degree, she shifted the conversation to the issues with family. She continued,

Probably some of my family might be a little intimidated, but I work very hard to make sure they aren't. When I first went to college, as a student, I had cousins who made fun of me for using a word with more than two syllables. I know that was a defense or coping mechanism for them. Now we have all gotten a little older. I have cousins who are my same age, and I've recently had children. They



have been in more of an expert position because they had children a long time ago. I think that makes them have a little bit more confidence. I go native in a second, and I don't know if that is good or bad. I think I do it more at family gatherings to make people feel more confident.

During the focus group, Nikki elaborated on issues within the family. She stated,

It is awkward, but it makes it just a little bit more comfortable for me if I can make them comfortable. You know I don't ever say anything about my job or anything I've written and I never do. I don't even mention anything to my parents. They would be proud of me, but it's just not cultural, if you do. I guess if you won a trophy in a sport or something like that or a drinking competition (laughter) that would be bragging rights. As it turns out, I haven't earned any of those special kinds of awards.

During the focus group, Nikki continued to elaborate about the gaps between the culture of the university and her upbringing. She describes the scenario at her defense. She continues,

I don't mean to dominate, but I have to share that my advisor in my Ph.D. program told me that I could invite people to my dissertation defense. I thought, "Really?" And I said, "Ok". So, I invited my parents, my best friend growing up, my husband, my pastor, his wife, and other people from home who would love me no matter what. Definitely my parents love me, but I remember the professor was a little taken back that I actually took him up on it. He was thinking I might have invited other doctoral students, I think. I had a roomful of people. It was a new

experience for all of them, and so I asked for questions at the end and my dad raised his hand. I looked at my major professor, and he gave me the nod. So, dad asked a question about how I chose participants, and I answered him. My husband raised his hand, and I don't even remember what his question was, but it was great. I felt like they had no idea coming to that experience, but that perhaps it was helpful for them to understand that it was significant. In my current position when I have people who have similar events that happen in their lives, I encourage them to bring those people to their significant events so that they can understand how important it is whether they really do or not.

Nikki points out her influence on immediate family members as she shares that her husband has returned to school to receive a degree. She doesn't feel that he understands her profession and neither does his family. However, she does believe she has had a positive influence on his returning to school. She continued,

They respect it, but they don't understand it. Last week I was explaining the difference between internal and external locus of control to my husband. I wanted him to own the power to go back to school. It wasn't just fate working on him.

He can control this situation.

Like the Desert Star, Nikki is strong and resilient and has overcome many odds to have thrived in the desert of her life. She has overcome issues of poverty, lack of familial support in undergraduate studies and numerous issues navigating throughout her academic career. She defines the tension as a cognitive dissonance between her educational environment and her upbringing. One of Nikki's gifts is the intrapersonal

strength within herself. That same strength has served as an obstacle at times within the structure of the family because they viewed her preference for isolation as a mystery.

**Lisa's quilt square.** The first square on the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) depicts a clock. This metaphor represents Lisa's ability to figure out the mechanics of how the university works and, more importantly, how to succeed in the world of academe. Lisa is a forty-six year-old working-class native of the northeast who now serves as a university professor in a small southeastern United States town. Lisa has significant nightmares which relate to her having a lack-luster high school experience and trying to find her way academically at the university. She added,

At the university, it was very difficult for me to pass. It was very difficult for me to do well. I shouldn't say pass. I figured out very quickly how not to fail because I was paying for college. I mean there were so many reasons why I didn't fail. I didn't want to fail. But, it was really hard for me to figure out how to do well. I was really behind when I got into college academically.

Lisa summarized her experience as vocational. Most people from the working class background in that particular part of her state were tracked out of the regular high school either to vocational or college track. Because of her non-traditional high school experience, Lisa experienced significant issues when she entered the university. She continued,

My high school was a place where you went to your academic classes every other week, so I had half the high school education you would if you were in a regular high school and then the other half, you did shop. You were unpaid labor for the community so, your first year was an exploratory shop where you did six different

shops and then you decided at the end of that exploratory year which shop you were going to focus on for the next three years of your high school career. You know, when you are seventeen, it's what everybody in my family not only did but also continues to do.

She added that her youngest nephew on her side of the family has decided he is going to the vocation high school and so the cycle continues. Students who attend the vocational high school rarely ever attend college, because of the gaps between the culture of the high school and the culture of the university. She continued,

I was one of three from the graduating class of over three hundred that went to college, and I was the only one that went to a four-year school. That's not saying that I was a wiz academically. My shop was vocational art. I went into college as an art major. It wasn't fine art, so that was a huge difference. You know when you go to college for art, compared to when you go to a vocational school to do graphics and commercial art. They're two totally different things. One is about labor. The other is about producing fine art for society. I don't remember it being difficult. I had done so much of it. I had done half of my four years as a high school student doing a lot of art. So, it was easy for me to keep up with the homework. It was easy for me to understand the lessons.

Lisa continued to explain how her peers could use study aides and get through Literature I and II, and she, on the other hand, had to "plow through twice". The gap between her high school preparation and the expectations at the university continued. She elaborated,

You know, I hadn't had the four years of high school preparation, so that was a huge source of difficulty for me, and that continued into my graduate degree.

Four years of high school, which was really the equivalent of two years, were just so lackluster. I had a lot of ground to make up academically. I remember making the Dean's List once one semester in undergraduate and that is the transcript I have kept. It was my junior year, the second semester of my junior year. In the olden days, they would stamp it with Deans List and that was the only time, and then, of course, graduate school posed another whole level of difficulty in terms of coming up to speed academically. So that was probably the most difficult experience that I had in my earlier years.

Navigating through the university culture certainly leaves some lasting and negative impressions, but imagine having all of the negative experiences wiped away by amnesia. Lisa has difficulty remembering some of her experiences at the university, due to amnesia. Lisa has significant gaps between her memory of the university experience and what actually happened. She stated,

It's interesting. I've studied amnesia in realizing I had these huge gaps. It was the only way I could piece together what went on with me. I remember parts of being an undergraduate. I don't remember it being difficult. I think the difficult stuff is what I've developed amnesia around. What I really remember was the juicy stuff or the stuff that kept me there-or made me feel mobile.

Lisa knows that certain things occurred. However, the gaps are overwhelming at times. She has evidences such as transcripts and a diploma. She added,

I have these items and this knowledge about having to have negotiated all of the things that first-gens do. But, I don't have any memories. I wonder about my parents. They had to drive me. I didn't have a car, and it was quite a ways from

my home. It was on the other part of the state. You know, I couldn't have gotten a ride. I didn't know anyone else going. They had to have taken me. I think they remember taking me, so all that really stands out is an absence of information and curiosity.

As an undergraduate, Lisa recollects being involved in a professor and student relationship. Even though she refers to the relationship as sordid, she believes he had some good intentions in guiding her toward graduate school. This relationship, although described by her as unhealthy, actually served as a motivator for her to succeed. She continued,

He really believed I could do it. All of this was brand new to me. He was a professor. He had already done all of this and, of course, his assessment was "You can do it."

However, Lisa continues to summarize the evolution of the relationship as she moved through the master's degree. She realized issues were emerging between her significant other's ideas of the direction she should be headed and her own personal aspirations. These issues were becoming more obvious. She added,

It was becoming clearer what this relationship was about and all of the elements about it that I didn't like. A lot hinged around his interest in moving me as far away from my family as possible. Not physically, but you know, emotionally, intellectually, culturally, really moving me away from my family. But, that didn't work so well, and I matured and became just more cognizant of what was happening from a power standpoint. I had navigated six years' worth of being in college and rather liked it.

At that point in time, Lisa was becoming more aware of her own aspirations while continuing to make connections and build relationships. She had spent time working in Residence Life and Student Services and decided the university was a pretty nice place to be. She elaborated about how she managed her application process to enter the doctoral program. She continued,

I did it quite secretly. It occurred to me that he wanted me to become educated and sophisticated and cultured to a point. The point was, I couldn't go as far as him. I mean it's power all the way down. So, frankly that was quite motivating for me. My dad used to call me "Sassy Britches." I sort of became "Sassy Britches," but it was very covert. He didn't know that I applied, but I remember getting the letter and hiding it because we spent a lot of time at one another's houses.

She described one of the motivations for continuing her education was the resistance she was feeling toward what he was doing to her and the tenacity to get around what was increasingly feeling like a constraint. Lisa attributed the tensions between her culture and the culture of the university as having to do with the people not knowing or not understanding. She believes there are fewer people who are first-generation college students who become academics than there are people who grew up in families whose parents are college educated. She didn't feel understood. Additionally, she experienced a significant disconnection in moving from one region of the country to the other. The culture was very different in each region, and she had to get used to a new culture and way of thinking and acting. She also attributes some of the issues she experienced to her coming from a blue collar background to teach at the university level Lisa added,

I became more aware of just how embodied I am in my pedagogy, my teaching style and my style of expression. As a person, I have literally become more closed. The bodily dimensions of my pedagogy have become more contained. The body that appears intelligent is in the form of dress. There are a lot of extrinsic signals and symbols for the body being valued in higher education. These are very different than the body being valued where I grew up. Coming from a working class background, we were loud. We yelled and, you know, we were loud with our bodies. It wasn't always in a voiced way. So, that has been a tension. That feels artificial, but navigating it in such a way that I am not offensive, you know. That was a big learning curve for me.

Continuing to elaborate on the issues between her upbringing and the culture of the university, Lisa surmised that it has taken time to try to figure out how not to offend people. She continued,

Learning that if I offended people in the first place was an awful feeling for me. That would be the last thing I would want to do. It is not popular here. It gets misread in terms of my intention.

She also noted that different modes of communication have been hard to sort out and to navigate and have been a source of tension in the past. Communication is perceived and valued in one region of the country very differently, as opposed to another region of the country. She elaborates,

I can remember my parents saying, "You need to talk less and do more." The body that talks is not lazy, but it is not laboring. The body that's laboring isn't talking. In factory settings and such, there's managers who go around and stop



people from talking. In higher education, what do we do in the doctoral program? We sit around the table and chat. We do it with purpose, and there's faculty lounges where the whole goal and the purpose is that faculty come together. There's something about the talking body. It is suspect in communities where the laboring body tends to be. I think that has something to do with my teaching comportment. That's probably been the biggest source of tension for me.

Lisa continued to speak about issues with family. She stated,

I am different. I code switch. I go back to being working-class body with working class speech or lack thereof. With my mom and sister. . . .We've been working at it for so long. . . .We've talked about it a little and that kind of thing. I can code switch back, but they can't code switch to me. I feel a sense of responsibility to maintain those connections. I'm the one who has to work at it and either get over or get through and dismiss the tensions that come with that boundary crossing.

When reflecting on her most pleasurable experiences at the university, Lisa spoke about the connections and relationships she built at the university. She elaborated,

I did everything I could. I became involved in Residence Life. I became a peer counselor and peer tutor. I became very involved in student government and was a student trustee. I was involved in selecting a new President for the university. All of this coupled with developing the kinds of relationships that you hope for your son and daughter to have developed if they went to college is just lasting friendships, the kind of friendships that are to the bone durable-deep friendships. I paid for my master's program by being a Residence Hall advisor. The most

pleasurable experience I had was figuring out that I was really good at something. College was a place where I grew and developed socially and emotionally. I hadn't figured out what it had done for me intellectually and it's not like I blew off the academic side of the house at all, but I was so jazzed and excited about the extracurricular events that I was involved in. I had started to figure out that I could be a professional and capitalize on my passion for being in a college setting or a university setting and working with students.

Lisa realized the impact of building relationships and establishing those connections in order to succeed as a doctoral student. She elaborated on how she met one of her significant mentors at the doctoral level. She had a two-hour commute one way, and that became very taxing on her. After a car accident, she decided to move to a closer institution and was awarded a position as a research assistant. She continued,

I lived like a pauper graduate student for the final year of my doctoral program. I moved much closer to my university in terms of pleasurable experiences. It was that intellectual sort of machinery locking into gear and starting to crank, and my mentors figuring that out with me. I was getting on birds' wings and going from there. I didn't have to perform. I really analyzed and unlocked what that meant for me and what that involved and then came the writing and support for the writing.

When her mentor went on leave, she asked Lisa to teach all of her qualitative classes while she was gone. She taught for a year and learned that she loved teaching at the university level. So many pleasurable experiences happened in that setting. However, she was serving as a replacement for her mentor. She continued,

They were her courses. I was doing it for her while she was gone. In fact when she returned, I continued teaching. I still felt like a graduate student. They say, “Once a graduate student, always a graduate student.”

However, as she began to elaborate about her current position, she stated that she is growing as a professor in her current teaching situation. She elaborated,

The pleasurable experience here has been kind of what happened to me in terms of realizing that I could unlock the code of being good at being academic from the thinking, researching and writing standpoint. Here, I figured out fairly quickly, because I had confidence from what had gone on at the former institution and how to be good at teaching. I had figured out how to be with students in a way that worked for me and still get the job done. My way of being with students is structured. I like to actually have relationships with students and mentor them. Given the numbers and reciprocity, I recognize in my way of teaching about the way I was taught. I don’t know who else to be, partly because of my personality. It’s not that I haven’t had bad teachers. I know full well what I could do just to get by and to not have relationships. That’s been pleasurable to have a lot of room for being the kind of teacher that I feel is best for me to be and getting to know students as a result of that commitment to that kind of relationship and teaching.

In speaking about the influences her doctorate has had on her family, she explained that with no health insurance, illnesses within the family can create havoc. Her dad was diagnosed with Type I diabetes, and she serves as a resource and an advocate for him and his health. She also has a sister who is a trained nurse who makes poor choices related to

her health. Concerning these relationships, she explained that her relationship with her sister and her health issues is much more difficult to negotiate than her relationship with her dad and his health issues. In reflecting on how her relationship with self has changed, she added,

My relationship with my own body has changed. The most significant way is that I am so keenly aware of the role that literacy plays. I am talking about how to read everything from journals to having a love for reading which I didn't grow up with. We didn't have books. As a result of that awareness of realizing how little literacy was a part of my experience growing up, I made up for it by reading to my child while he was in my belly. I still don't read for pleasure. For me, there's really no such thing. I didn't grow up reading novels. That is not a source of departure for me. When people ask, "Oh, what are you reading this summer?" I respond, "A book on philosophy, or whatever." That's become pleasurable for me. I've never been able to regain or retool myself to read for pleasure.

Lisa continued to elaborate that the most reading she can accomplish is a short magazine article. She reads novels, and, occasionally, she will get through one. She has read several novels, but shared how she read more because of obligation than of pleasure. She feels that makes her a geek. Another way her relationship with her self has changed is in her art. She added,

I'm starting to think that I do art differently as a result of my accomplishments. During my high school experience, we were forced to do art as a vocation. You know, I would draw fifteen different versions of toe shoes for the local ballet school and their print ad in the newspaper. I would hand lay, and this is pre-

computer processing, these different vinyl letters in different scroll types. I would create mark-up samples for restaurants to make changes on their menu. This was a very pedestrian style of art projects that we had to do. We couldn't be paid, because that would be child labor. We had lots of opportunities. Local businesses would bid for our labor because they didn't have to pay for it. All they would have to supply were materials, and we would do the work. It was education, and we had a steady stream of work. In fact, I could get out of academics and did frequently. In many cases, I was told I had to get out of my academic weeks to complete jobs for local businesses as a high school student. But, even that experience didn't change how she engaged or the fact that she continues to engage in art. She started at a very young age drawing. She believes that art replaced, in some ways, what she didn't get in reading. But, she emphasized how art is really a source of imagination and pleasure for her. Lisa continued,

In my heart of hearts, if I had it to do over, I probably would have continued my studies as an art major. I can thank my significant other in college and his telling me that was not going to work.

Lisa continued to explain that within the last decade and certainly much more intentionally, in the past six to seven years, she has felt very focused on doing art as scholarship. She elaborated,

I enjoy blending my love of drawing and painting with my love of analysis and intellectual endeavors. I love to read with artwork. I love to think with drawing and painting. I enjoy bringing those mental and physical activities closer together in as close proximity as I can. That has been a change for me.

She credits this as a result of being in higher education, and she also stated that perhaps tenure at the university had something to do with that. She continued,

I have permission to do that now. I don't know a lot of other people in the College of Education who spend as much time as I do in the college of art or in the art department or trying to do scholarship as a creative endeavor, which I'm doing increasingly more. So, that's been a really exciting change for me, and I say tenure has given me permission to do this. It goes back to the performance.

At any rate, the art piece has been a real change in a lifelong activity as a result of me being in higher education.

**Nora's quilt square.** On the ninth square of the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) rests an incredible image of a starfish. A starfish is a refreshing, yet representative, metaphor for strength and endurance. As I stood gazing at the depiction of the starfish, I thought of a quote Nora made during the interview, "My star has continued to rise." Yes, it has. I reflected on the story of Nora, a forty-four- year-old central office administrator who serves in a small rural district. She was one of seven children. In reflecting on her family, Nora stated,

I was number five in the lineup. Through the years, I have had nothing that compares to my family. It's not the car I drive. It's not the clothes I wear. It's not the job that I have. Nothing on this earth compares to that bond that I have with my family. So they have been very, very important to me, and I've made sacrifices as far as being able to spend as much time with them as I would like to. Over the past years, as this journey has been going on, which seems like forever, I have been getting one degree after another.

Nora paused and reflected for a moment on her doctoral portion of the journey and its impact on relationships. She too noted tension between the culture of the university's expectations and those relationships she values. She continued,

I am a professional. I am a daughter. I am a sister. I am an aunt. So, for a professor to look at me and say, "Every spare moment of your time must be spent on my course work" was a conflict for me. I will just be real honest with you because there are lines in the sand that I will draw. I have always had to work. I have never had the means to choose not to work. So, that was just a troublesome thing for me. That was what I was supposed to do every waking moment. It wasn't a reality. I had to work. I had to keep a roof over my head. I had to have insurance. You know those things. I had to have food on the table, and then you know, it's like I said. I am a part of something that's much greater than I am and that is my family. There were just some things that I absolutely would not give up and had I been pushed, I would have given up the degree before I would have given up my family. So that's probably the biggest conflict between my upbringing and the culture of the university.

Nora began the university experience as a non-traditional college student. She decided to enter the work force soon after high school graduation and work as a secretary in a factory. She soon realized the need for change in her life. She realized she did not fit into this scene at all. She elaborated,

I graduated from high school, and I thought that I knew a lot more than my parents, so I shared with them that I did not plan to go to the university. I went straight into the work force. I graduated on Friday and started to work on

Monday. About three months into that situation, I realized that I had made a bad decision, and that was based on a couple of things. At the time, I only made \$4.25 per hour. I learned very quickly that just over four dollars an hour doesn't go very far when you have a house payment, a car payment, utilities and all of those things.

Nora worked through this situation for about nine months and continued to struggle with how to positively change the unfortunate situation in which she had found herself. She continued,

I did not fit in. I soon realized the only way out was to get a better education. So, even as frightened as I was, just being a year out of high school, I questioned whether I could really do it or not. But, somehow or another I ended up at the community college. I talked to someone in their admissions program and they told me the things that I had to do as far as scheduling, placement tests and those sorts of things. I went over a couple of times and took a series of tests, one of which kind of zeroed in on areas that might be of interest to me.

She stated that she did not remember if education was one of the careers mentioned as a strength on that test. She described this experience as one of the hoops she had to jump through. Another hoop was to see where she was academically in reference to her skills so she could register for classes.

At that point, I had absolutely no vision of the kind of future I wanted. They steered me into a liberal arts program, where I started taking classes and getting in touch with those key people. Just having enough sense about me to go to admissions or even ask the right questions was amazing.



Once Nora was able to make those connections and establish relationships, things started happening. She did experience significant financial issues; however, she had the confidence to seek changes, which perpetuated the rise to success in her life. She continued,

I felt very intimidated even though I had been a very good student in high school. I was an honor graduate. I had taken college prep courses. However, it chips away at your self-confidence a little bit when you don't have a real support system, and I didn't. My parents were really excited that I had decided to do it. There were financial concerns which had always played a part in my education. My parents didn't have the means to pay for my college. So when you are questioning things like how am I going to make this happen? Do I have the academic skills? Those things could deter you from pursuing an education, but luckily, they didn't with me.

Nora also discussed her self-confidence and the differences between the culture of the university and her own self. She continued,

When I first entered the community college, I questioned my confidence just a little bit. I had to prove to myself that I could do this and the way that I did that, I started out very slowly. I actually just took one class per term. But, that's the way that I had to do it and part of that was to see if I could juggle the time element. I also wanted to make sure I could build my confidence so that I could be successful. I have never wanted to do anything halfway. Even though I was only a part-time student at the community college, I wanted that to be a good experience.

Nora attributes her success at the university to socialization. When asked about her most pleasurable moments at the university, she replied,

Oh, by far, the social aspect of school was the most enjoyable. I have never enjoyed writing or researching or studying for tests. The most enjoyable part of school has always been the social part, and just some of those friends that I made. It was very, very different from the setting where I was working. I really didn't have a lot of work friends. My friends were at the community college, and they have been throughout. I have some of the dearest friends of my life that I have met in these programs and also people with whom I have worked. I truly think that I will take that with me forever, and these by far, have been the most pleasant experiences.

In the beginning, all she really wanted was change. She wanted to get that initial degree, a bachelor's degree. She soon realized the importance of building relationships along the way and the impact those relationships would have on her future success. She continued,

He [her mentor] guided me, and I worked with a wonderful team of teachers. So, that working relationship with teachers also encouraged, or enabled me, to think that I could indeed pursue a Master's degree in School Administration. I was also fortunate to have a colleague with whom I was able to carpool, and together, we both completed the master's degree. We were also in a great cohort, and that cohort model? I can't say enough about that. I think that's powerful, and it has always worked very well with me. Anytime I have worked on an advanced degree, I've liked that model.

Nora pointed out that even though she decided to go back for her master's degree in her third year of teaching, she was really in her eighth year of working for the public schools. She was unique in that she had started out as a teacher's assistant and bus driver for five years prior to becoming a teacher. Because of her desire to want more for her life, she continued to move up the ladder of success. She added,

I just knew in looking at my day-to-day work, that those jobs would never satisfy me for thirty years. So I had to do something. I could open some other doors for myself, if I chose to, and I did.

When asked about changed relationships in her life, she stated that she preferred to begin with the negative first. As she cleared her throat, she began to gather her thoughts. She said,

It is no secret that I am divorced and, probably, if I were being completely honest with you, it's because the relationship was shaky to begin with. But with every degree that I earned, the divide between the two of us grew. I was growing, and he wasn't, for the most part. He was the same person that graduated from the local high school in 1985. So I became very preoccupied with school and with work and probably that was a defense mechanism. Things were not great at home, and that divide just grew. It grew to the point that before I ever finished the doctorate, we separated, and for me, it's been fine. It's been great. For me, my star has continued to rise. There's a part of me that feels a little bit guilty about it, but then there's a part that doesn't feel guilty. My star has continued to rise, not only with my education but also because of my education. Doors have opened that I never dreamed would open, and I hope eventually that I will find a

superintendency that fits me and that I fit and can add even more to a school system.

For Nora, the divorce was the most negative situation, but there have also been some very positive changes in her relationships. She continued,

I think I have gained a greater respect within my family. I do know my family is very, very proud. They're my very best cheerleaders, and they have been there with me through thick and thin. They have been there at the best and they have been there at the worst, and they have always been a super great support system. I do think they admire what I have done. They admire the dues that I have paid and the sacrifices that I have made. They know that it has not been easy.

Nora continued to discuss how, because of her doctorate, people look upon her a little differently. She continued to discuss relationships,

I don't think a doctorate entitles you to anything that you are not willing to work for, and I have very strong feelings about that. I know that people have insisted upon calling me Dr. So and So, when my first name would have sufficed. In acknowledgement of such an accomplishment, they do that out of respect. Those relationships, I think, have deepened.

Nora elaborated on the issues in her life. She continued,

My academic life has continued to enable me to be an independent woman growing up in a situation where poverty was very real. Like I said, I am one of seven children. Whereas instead of that father being the breadwinner, to be quite truthful, my mother was the breadwinner. She made just over minimum wage, so you can just imagine that. In my first job, I started out at \$4.25 per hour, and I

feel very, very strongly that there was never a man hired in that company at that small amount of pay. And, growing up in poverty, you are very afraid to go back to it. That crosses your mind a lot. Even though my family's precious to me, there were very difficult times financially. My academic life, my successes, my degrees and my promotions have enabled me to be a strong independent woman, both financially and emotionally. The man I have chosen to be with, I have chosen out of my desire to do that, not out of need, and that has been very empowering. And I know, as well as I am sitting right here, that my education has allowed me to do those things. I know that I would have never been as financially stable as I am right now, had I not furthered my education.

In conclusion, Nora reflected on the incredible journey that started twenty-four years ago.

She continued,

With every degree that I finished, another door has opened. It's been a great story to be able to tell that I started as a teacher's assistant and bus driver and I have worked my way up in every position. I think that I hold a level of credibility that very few educational leaders have the privilege of holding. There's a certain amount of respect. There's a certain amount respect from the women who are very excited to have a woman in this position. I need to bring a close to the good old boy system somewhere where you will work for everything that you have. You will bring credibility and competence to the table, and that's my goal before I retire at whatever age I decide to retire. I intend to bring it to an end, somewhere. It's not because of who you are or the gender that you are, but you will earn exactly what you get in that school system in positions of leadership. My parents

never told me that life would be easy or that I would get anything for free. I don't expect that to this day. Some great things have happened to me, and I have paid my dues and I am proud of that.

Like the starfish, Nora has overcome difficulties and obstacles; however, she has continued to gain success and self-confidence through her numerous accomplishments. Like Nora, the sea star is rejuvenating in nature, is versatile and is able to survive harsh conditions.

**Rose's quilt square.** I notice the second square on the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) has a depiction of a lovely *Papilio Ulysses* butterfly, which is native to New Guinea. As I reflect on the crispness of the turquoise/blue and black, I immediately recollect the symbolic nature of the butterfly. Butterflies and dragonflies have transcended time as symbolic figures of new opportunities. My mind then wanders to Rose, a forty-nine-year-old central office administrator, who has frequently changed positions and made the most of new opportunities throughout her life. She would be the first to remind one of those changes and the tremendous opportunities those changes have brought her way. Rose began her educational journey in 1981 in a small county in southeastern United States. Her father attended some community college courses; however, she never had a doubt that she would attend a four-year institution. During her first visit to the university, orientation, she realized the impact of the gaps between the university and her family's lack of ability to navigate university business. However, Rose also realized the importance of relationships and the influence those people had on her entrance to the university. She describes the scene during orientation. Rose elaborated,

My parents did not know about university business, so, therefore, orientation and registration were quite difficult. My mother actually went with me, as most parents do to the orientation, and at that time, it was an overnight experience, so we got to see dorm life first-hand. We also got to tour the campus even though we had actually been to some football games and some cultural events there. We were also able to see some classrooms. I remember thinking that the classrooms didn't differ much from my small high school experience, until we reached the library and that was just such an overwhelming experience. Even though I had been in several museums by that point in my life and had been to several auditoriums for cultural events and that sort of thing, just the volume of volumes, I think, was overwhelming to me, scary and very intimidating. Meeting professors in that orientation was very different, coming from a high school graduation class of eighty-one in 1981. Thinking about the history class, in an auditorium with two-hundred students was quite unnerving. So, these fears, I'm sure, are typical of everyone. However, I did not know how to navigate the system, because my parents had not attended the university. So, being a first-generation college attendee created extra hurdles to overcome.

She continued to share that her parents were highly intelligent, and so, therefore, she was able to overcome some of the hurdles at the university. However, she believes the professors in the College of Education at the university could read the expressions on faces in the orientation group. She continued,

They pulled me aside. At least I knew my major when I arrived on campus and it didn't change. So, I think it's interesting that it was in the department that I was

eventually going to declare a major. That's where the pull aside help was received. Maybe because they knew we were interested in elementary education. Rose elaborated on how that experience confirmed her belief in public education and in the kindergarten through graduate degree system and the fact that she thinks education departments typically reach out to students. She continued,

I thought the day ended well. I remember some of the students in my group who had never been on a college campus, but that wasn't my experience. I had seen the cafeteria because I had attended some camp experiences, so that was not overwhelming to me. However, it was to some of my peers who were in a similar situation. I remember it being extremely scary and intimidating and anxious in the beginning. However, once I got into the College of Education at the local university, believe it or not, I felt better when we left for the day.

During the focus group, Rose reiterated her experiences as a first-generation woman student navigating the university system and the gaps that existed between the culture of the university and the culture of her upbringing. She added,

I first began thinking about college at an early age, probably late elementary school. Although my parents neither one attended a four-year university, I think there was never a doubt that I was to go to college. I think that was just assumed. The negotiation was very different once we got beyond that assumption. I had a small scholarship to a state university, but, of course, that did not cover even the first year of tuition. So, there was the issue if I was to live on campus or should I try to travel back and forth from home. The negotiation of that first step of where I would live was quite difficult to be truthful. My mother ended up going to the



campus with me after I graduated high school, and we attempted to find all of the offices that we needed to go to. She helped to get me enrolled, and to be frank with you, I did not have a good high school counselor experience. I think because my parents were very involved in my education, everyone assumed at the high school that I would be just fine. I had parents who were involved, but keep in mind, my parents didn't know how to navigate the system any better than I. In some ways, I probably knew better than they, so it was a rough first week. It was a rough orientation with lots of questions. We left the orientation with a lot of unanswered questions, partly because we didn't know what to ask or even how to ask.

In elaborating on the cycle of poverty, during the focus group session, Rose added,

The cycle of poverty for me is parallel. It is not the same, but parallel. It's all about breaking that cycle, even though my parents were better off than their parents before them. I qualified for Head Start services, and I'm certain that, had my dad not been so proud, I would have qualified for free lunch. But, because of that mountain-pride factor, we didn't ask for help. I think I am similar to Elizabeth (p. 111). I was number three in a rather large high school class and did well in undergraduate and great in masters. I still struggle to this day with what was lacking education wise, especially foundationally. Am I really good enough to do this next job? I think that comes from that cycle of poverty. . .rural. . .very uneducated populace. There were very few educated people in my county, besides doctors, lawyers and the teachers. Most everyone else probably didn't

even have a high school education. . .much less a college education. . .so there's a parallel there with rural poverty.

Rose elaborated on the importance of helping other first-generation students along their way. She added,

I have found in helping others to push that voice off their shoulder which, in turn, has helped me push that voice off my shoulder. If I can encourage a first-generation college student, then I feel like that's the experience that stands out in my mind. Or if I can influence a beginning teacher who just can't see themselves hanging in there. It's been all about hearing their voices.

Rose considers her journey to the doctoral level as accidental. She continues to elaborate on the impact a significant mentor had on her educational journey. She continued,

I was going to be perfectly content teaching in my K-5 class. I was going to retire as a thirty-year veteran in a kindergarten classroom and had no desire whatsoever to pursue a master's degree or an Educational Specialist degree or even a doctorate, for that matter. Those thoughts were just foreign until about year eight of my teaching career. I had a principal who was a really influential friend of my family but also a good mentor for me.

Rose elaborated on how she had started out teaching in an arts program. She served seven elementary schools and one high school. She served twenty-seven hundred students in a year. Through this experience, she was able to see the entire county school system early in her career. She had the opportunity to work for all of the principals on certain days of the week in those schools, and so she felt she was lucky in that sense. She continued,

I could see whose philosophy aligned with mine, where I fit, and where I didn't. I had the small school versus the medium-size school experience.

Rose's journey continued with a Master's in School Administration. The opportunity to move to another school also opened a door for a part-time administrative slot on one end of the building, which provided supplemental pay. Once again, she realized the impact of relationships, especially those of significant mentors and role models. She elaborated,

It was accidental, and I only made that decision to go for a Master's in School Administration because the principal did a little pushing me in the right way and he kept saying, "But, the children need this or that." When someone says, "The children need this or that," you just do it. So, it was totally accidental. I loved administration. I did part-time teaching in the morning. I oversaw discipline, buses, and meetings in the afternoon and ended up loving it! And it was all because of one principal! Hopefully, I am mentoring the way that I was mentored. And, once again, it's all about relationships.

When asked about the tensions she experienced with education, she quickly reflected on issues with extended family. She elaborated,

It all started with a Christmas Dinner. We were a small family in number but had great-aunts, great-uncles, and cousins. My father was one of three, and my mother was an only child. One of my family members said to me, "Well, now, I just want you to remember where you came from, and I'm going to tell you, you'd better not get above your raising!" So, whew! That one sums it up! There weren't really any tensions from my immediate family, but from my extended family. My daddy was livid, and he quickly replied to her, "That was uncalled

for!” Of course, that hushed the Christmas conversation, and we all changed the subject.

Rose continued to elaborate on the gaps between the university expectations and her own expectations. She stated,

I was used to juggling work and just being happy with a B in undergraduate work. In certain astronomy, physics, and other courses, I probably didn’t have the background coming from a small high school, so I guess the struggle was managing workloads, which was typical. But, atypically, because it was a small high school and having to say to yourself, “It’s ok to get that B with that hard professor and that really tough class that you probably didn’t have the background to take right then.” That was the juggle for me.

Rose continued to elaborate on the importance of adults building relationships with first-generation students and helping students in this economy with these difficult issues that perplex them. She continued,

I didn’t know how to navigate the system, but I don’t think adults always have enough information to share with regard to financial aid, scholarships, and grant support. I came upon some of that knowledge really late in my career. But, hopefully, I have been able to help others with some knowledge that I quite on accident obtained. We, as educators, are obliged now to help each other with grant opportunities, scholarships or anything we can do to help students and teachers progress on their careers and in their paths.

Rose continued to comment on how since the economy is struggling, first-generation adults who have made it through need to provide resources and encouragement to others who are getting ready to begin their journey. She elaborated,

We can encourage them to seek advice, so they can achieve higher degrees if they are already in our teaching force. But, we need to also remind our college students there will be a way. We need to say to them, “Here are some resources or here’s a website for you. Here’s what you need to be planning on right now.” That’s an obligation that we have perhaps not considered before, but with the economy the way it is, we’ve had to take on additional roles and help folks in different ways.

When questioned about pleasurable experiences along her academic journey, Rose continued,

It’s about not being afraid to ask for help when you are not able to figure something out. I think that was the pleasure. Most of life experiences are similar and university experiences from Bachelor’s degrees to doctoral work are no different than either a teaching experience or a principalship. It’s about knowing who to go to. It’s about building those relationships to ask for that help that you need and not being afraid to say, “You know I don’t know. I haven’t seen this before. How should I approach this?” Rose then tied the conversation to her doctoral journey and pointed out the importance of matching yourself with a good doctoral faculty member. This is key to surviving the principalship, the central office work, the doctoral experience, the university work and the dissertation.

Rose elaborated on the fact that if you read her resume you would, on paper, believe she does not know how to hold down a job because she went from elementary teaching to assistant principalship. Then, she left that role and went to do some state public education work and then regional work. Then, she went to an Assistant Superintendency in a neighboring county, and for each of those opportunities, she was recruited. She continued,

And, again, I was an accidental doctorate. I was an accidental job changer because I did not go on the web searching for job changes. I've been lucky and very fortunate in my career. I am a small system-type person, and I think that comes from living in small communities, going to a small high school and needing those relationships to be built very extensively. It was luck. It was all about being matched with the right people and being in the right place at the right time.

She has also served at the local university as departmental director which was not a tenured faculty line. This particular university had lots of public school people in college director roles, and she also taught at the community college. She taught freshmen at the university and worked closely with the Teaching Fellows Director. Additionally, she taught seminars and supervised student teachers.

When you are talking about pleasurable experiences, it's been interesting how you're led to places and by other people even when you're not job hunting. So, I've been extremely fortunate to have taught kindergarten through doctoral students with really not a whole lot missing in between. I had a couple of

interviews and chose well to be where I am now in a small system, small central office and wear lots of hats. It's a very good place to be.

Rose continued to build on the importance of relationships as she described her journey.

She elaborated,

I've maintained friendships, interestingly enough with folks from my hometown and with whom I did not graduate, but who are life-long friends. These are twenty-plus-year friendships, and those have been maintained. Those have not changed.

However, her tone changed as she moved to one of the deeper negative changes. She continued,

I was married and in four years, we had our daughter, and then I decided that I wanted to go on and pursue a master's degree. So, I think, in truth, looking very psychologically and if we were in a counseling setting, I think I outgrew that marriage. I think that, even though he had a four-year degree, he had lots of other issues. So, I'm not going to tell you that the single reason for our divorce was my outgrowing a marriage through other university work. But, it was a contributing factor on my side. Plus, he had lots of other emotional issues. For some from the outside looking in, there was a huge change in our relationship that was caused primarily by my university experiences. But, I don't think it was the primary reason. I think it was a secondary, but that was a relationship that dramatically changed.

Rose's tone then changed, and she shifted her discussion to her relationship with her daughter. Her daughter was born in between her degrees. She continued,

My relationship with my daughter evolved. I am not going to tell you that it changed. When she was four or five, I was working on a master's degree. She was beginning kindergarten, and then I began my Ed.S. work when she was in middle school. I began the doctorate when she was in high school, so I think our relationship evolved. There was never any doubt that single parents, women in particular, can have it all if you want it all and you're willing to juggle the family life and the career. You can have it all. She's now a four-year graduate and actually has a teaching license. She is currently pursuing a master's in business administration. So, I guess that's important to me. It was a very positive evolution.

During the focus group, Rose elaborated on issues within the family. She elaborated,

When I return to my hometown, they don't know what to do with me, either. I am extremely blessed that I am in a very tiny family. I do not have the stigma, and I don't have to choke down casseroles. I am blessed in the sense that I can go at least to a house in my hometown and not feel the green-eyed monster. But, it's that, "We will ask her. She will do it." I have done everything from build campfires, to write living wills, to provide revocable living trusts training for which, quite frankly, I am not qualified. I haven't been asked to perform surgery, Claire, but I am waiting. But remember, I am the one who should not be here. I have had to knock that person off my shoulder and help others knock that person off their shoulder, and I am talking about that negative very self-esteem destroying voice. I think I vacillate, and they are never going to know what to do



with me. However, you know, after you've had that prefix in front of your name for a while, you personally forget about it.

During the focus group, on building relationships with future first-generation students, Rose added,

We have to continue to help future leaders be they female or male. We have to continue to help first-generation potential students by sharing our stories so they know they are not alone.

Like the lovely *Papilio Ulysses* butterfly, Rose continues to thrive and serve as a symbol for transitions and change. With every new opportunity, she rises to the occasion with beauty and resilience.

**Sandy's quilt square.** The Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) has a third square with a coffee cup, which represents the meeting of minds. Oftentimes, around campuses, groups and/or individuals gather to have a cup of coffee, discuss the day's lectures, read, journal, conduct research, and/or work on upcoming projects. At times, a cup of coffee or hot tea allows a time to pause and reflect on one's academic life. As I was pondering the significance of a cup of coffee or hot tea and visualized the rich scholarly discussions and the meeting of the minds, I thought about Sandy. Sandy is a forty-year old community college instructor in early childhood education in a small town in the southeastern United States. She brought diversity in academic experiences to the position. Just as a simple cup of coffee encourages the blending of intelligence, perspectives and voice, Sandy has many rich and diverse experiences to bring to the position. She received both her bachelor's and master's degrees from a medium-sized southern university. Soon, thereafter, she attended a smaller university in her hometown

to pursue the Education Specialist degree, and then, on to a larger institution in another state in southeastern United States to complete her doctoral level coursework.

In 1989, Sandy was a freshman on her first college campus. The experience was new and exciting, however, crowded. When elaborating on her entrance to the university, Sandy elaborated,

I saw all of these people my age milling around this beautiful campus. I was excited because, I was an only child getting away. I reflected, “I’m going away from home. I am going away from town. I’m on my own now. I’ve got a whole new adventure in front of me. I like the feel of a university campus. I like walking through the coffee shops, walking through the buildings, and I knew this was where I needed to be.” I was enrolled and just kept going. I consider myself a knowledge junkie shall we say? I enjoyed learning, so I wanted to go back, and I enrolled at another university.

During the focus group, Sandy shared a little more about her parents who inspired her. She was quick to add that, even though her parents were significant role models, she was intrinsically motivated. She stated,

I didn’t have any teacher or any person outside of the family, for that matter. I would have to say, starting out, it was just my mom and my dad who, not having gone to school, (and I may be a little biased) are brilliant. Dad’s strengths are math and science. Mom’s strength is English. From an early age, I was told it was my job to do well in school. The rule in high school was, “You will not bring home a C.” The only C I have ever made was in college algebra. I can remember telling mom and dad that they were so hard on me. My friends’ parents loved

them and accepted them for who they were. I can remember them looking at me squarely in the eyes and saying, “The Good Lord has blessed you with an exceptional brain and you are going to use it. If all you could do was a C, we would accept that, but you can do better.”

When Sandy went to college, she thought her parents were hounding her. As she finished her bachelor’s degree, they would say, “Stay and get your masters while you are there and go straight through.” She stayed there an extra year and got her master’s degree. She elaborated,

It’s just like others have said. You have to have something on the inside. I enjoyed school, and if there was something else I could get, I wanted it. The university, in my hometown, did not have a doctoral program, but they had a specialist program, and I went and got my Ed.S. after three years. I can remember my parents asking, “When are you going for the doctorate?” I just finished my Ed.S. Can you not give me some claps and be happy for me? And so they kept on about the doctorate, and I started six to seven years ago when I found a program.

During the time that Sandy was working toward the Education Specialist degree, she was able to reside at home with her parents and take four to five classes per term. She continued,

As I walked onto that campus, as compared to my bachelor’s and master’s degrees, I felt more confident.

She felt readily prepared by her undergraduate institution to pursue advanced studies. In 2002, Sandy moved to a southeastern state and worked several years in K-12 public

education. She decided to apply to pursue her doctorate in a small town about two hours from her home. In addition to serving as a community college instructor, she began the doctoral journey, which involved commuting several times per week. Sandy dealt with some gaps between her age and experience in the doctoral program. Soon after completing three degrees, she was ready to pursue the doctorate. She continued,

Upon my first day walking in, I thought, “I am pretty young for this group.” I also thought, “I am pretty inexperienced.” That’s how I felt because there were people from all over the state. I thought, “What am I going to contribute to this group?” I was a little more nervous about what I was going to encounter and what I could contribute. I was excited though. If it’s the highest that I can get, then I want it! To be quite honest, it’s that same motivation that makes me think, now I want a Ph.D.! There was a little difference between myself and some of my fellow classmates. Some folks even made mention of it. The majority of the people in my classes were there because they were pursuing an advanced position at their current jobs. Or, they were told, in order to advance or keep their current administrative position, they needed to get the advanced degree. No one was pressuring me. I wanted it for the pure reason that I wanted it. It’s the highest you can go, and I want that! My parents are a conundrum for not having finished college. They are very intelligent. So, I grew up with very high expectations. As a matter of fact, they wanted me to become an engineer. We had high standards. You know. If I can do it, you can do it. Sometimes I hear students say, “I can only take one class a semester because I’ve got to work and do such and such.” I think, “Really?” Let me tell you, I drove two hours one-way to class once to

twice a week. I wouldn't get out until around ten at night, and I drove home. I then came to work the next day. If you want it bad enough, you can do it. You'll do what it takes. This might be a negative, but sometimes I am a little less lenient.

Sandy continued to elaborate on issues between the culture of the university and her own experiences. She also elaborated on building relationships at the university and how pleasurable those experiences can be. She added,

Meeting some of the people who were like-minded who wanted to go to school and pursue the same kind of education as you, gave me a sense of belonging. One of the most pleasurable experiences was meeting a professor who has since passed away. I entered the doctoral program as a cultural outsider, in my opinion. Not only was I a woman in my mid-thirties, but I was not married yet. My fiancé and I were engaged to be married during that academic year. We had no plans on having children. Most of my classmates were slightly older than myself. They had gotten married at a very young age, worked their careers, and their children were in middle school, high school, and college. We connected pleausurably on the educational level. I really didn't fit in socially, shall I say? I didn't share those same experiences. This professor was married and had no children. I found someone I could talk to, and one who was in the type of position that I could see myself looking forward to one day. I thought, "If she can do it, then I can do it." You know, if she is a professor at a college and hasn't shared these same life experiences, I can do it too. It's a little odd to be looking at this level for someone

similar who has shared your same experiences and someone you can look up to, but I still was.

Since completing her doctorate, Sandy reflected on honoring her parents, by maintaining her maiden name for her graduation. She elaborated,

I perceive that my parents are even more proud of me. I had not changed my maiden name. One of my main reasons for not changing my maiden name to my married name was because my father and mother did not graduate from college. I wanted them to hear my maiden name, their name, as I crossed the stage. I wanted them to hear the word doctor with my maiden name as I walked across the stage. My husband is also proud. He is very supportive and couldn't be happier.

During the focus group session, Sandy was relieved to hear that other families have similar issues, especially concerning her earned doctorate. Her parents are proud, but she has difficulty with others within the extended family. She doesn't want to make others feel uncomfortable. She elaborated,

I've got to say I'm just so glad to hear that about your family because my parents were both from families where they were one of ten children. I'm an only child. They learned quickly that smaller is better, and I am the only one out of the siblings' children who has gone this far. Some went to college, but they never went this far. Much like you guys, sometimes I don't want to talk about it. My parents don't want to shut up. My mom can't understand why I kind of shy away. I know they are proud of me, but when you are in large family gatherings, I never thought I would feel that I was not supposed to share, but then, you get a little

embarrassed. I don't want them thinking, "Who does she think she is?" I don't want to make anybody feel that way.

Once Sandy completed her doctorate, she experienced a significant issue within her work place. She elaborated,

When I first started the program, my administrator was not encouraging. She is partial to a different university, and she made no qualms about comparing the rigor between schools. I did hear the quote, "It's not worth the paper it's written upon." She was referring to my degree. So, I had to take that in stride. It was hard to come to work with someone who I knew didn't respect what I was doing. To be quite honest, she had zero respect for what I was doing, and that was difficult. I knew her true feelings because they had already come out. Then, toward the end, when I reached the end, there was a discussion at work about using the title, doctor. I will remember this for as long as I live. She said, "It's laughable to use the title, doctor." It is her opinion that the word "doctor" is something that shouldn't be used. She made no uncertain terms of how she felt. To me, that's why educators aren't respected. If we don't respect ourselves and don't expect others to respect us, how do we expect the public to view us? I'm not saying I am a medical doctor by any stretch, but dern it, I earned it! I found that very hostile, I'll say. I still use it on my syllabus. That was the only thing that I found difficult at the end. However, my friends made me a little plaque with doctor plus my name.

When asked about other changes in her life, Sandy focused on relationships. She offered,

They are more subtle. They are more personal. I can really see how proud mom and dad are. She's extremely proud. I'm the only one out of both sides who has completed this much of an advanced degree. So, they are very proud. When my mom introduces me to people, she will say, "This is my daughter, Dr. and my name." They're a little proud. When my husband first introduced me to his colleagues and associates, that's how he was, as well. Here at work, people treat me the same. They are all nice and friendly. They do acknowledge my accomplishment. I've had people ask me what I am going to do. They will say, "You are not possibly going to stay here? You can't be getting this degree for the sole satisfaction. You have to be working toward something else. So what are your plans? What's next?" So, that's been a change. I would do it all again.

Sandy continues to experience success and like the metaphor of the coffee cup.

She enjoys growing professionally and striving to continue her journey as a lifelong learner. She enjoys the feel of the university campus and enjoys her teaching position. So, like scholars collaborating over the smell of fresh coffee, Sandy continues to serve as a professor and inspires students to make the most of their lives.

**Elizabeth's quilt square.** The sixth square of the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G), the weathervane, represents Elizabeth. On the farm, the weathervane shows the direction of the upcoming rain. Especially during storms, the weathervane is eager to change directions. Elizabeth is a fifty-eight-year-old central office administrator in a medium-sized school district which includes five high schools, four middle schools, and thirteen elementary schools. Elizabeth describes her background very poignantly. She



was the oldest of four and survived abuse from her father. She entered into an abusive marriage at a very young age. Her opinion was that she and her husband were married way too young to have been allowed to marry. They had two children and she remarried prior to continuing her education. She had two additional children. She added,

It seems, though, that I don't know who that person was anymore. When I talk about it now, it seems like something that I read in a book. It's been so long ago, and my life has changed so dramatically. That was a horrible divorce.

As a high school dropout, she remembers sitting in her living room one early morning with her four children playing off to the side. From her view, she could see her mother-in-law's farm next door. As she gazed out the window, she noticed her mother-in-law trudging up the path to take care of the farm animals. The elder woman's bent and decrepit body was becoming more and more apparent as time passed. It was at that specific moment that Elizabeth recollected deciding that she must do something about her future to end the cycle of poverty. She decided then that she must do something about her future. She had no desire to continue in the footsteps of her mother-in-law. Without an earth-shattering change, she would be in that same position for years to come.

Elizabeth gathered herself together and decided to go to the nearby community college.

Elizabeth decided she would prefer to become a teacher; however, she was concerned about setting such a high ambition and failing in front of family and friends. So, she told everyone she wanted to become a teacher's assistant. She had been out of school for thirteen years. Earlier in life, she had been a good student; however, that first day on campus, she recalls feeling like a "fish out of water". Elizabeth decided to go for two

years to the community college and get her associate's degree. Elizabeth decided on her own to make this significant change in her life. She stated,

I had been telling myself, in my head, if I could be successful and could earn the grades that I wanted to earn, then, I would go on and become a teacher. So I got my grades, and I had A's.

She proceeded to elaborate on how she felt going to Student Services and changing her course of study from an associate's degree to college transfer. She explained that she would usually always include her husband in any major decisions; however, she decided to make this one on her own. She went home and told him what she had done, and everything was fine. Elizabeth added,

I should have known that it would be. For me, that was a big deal to make that big decision on my own. I knew that I would have to go so far beyond the community college to do that. I didn't have a clue to know how to start looking at colleges, so for me, that was a big day.

Elizabeth stated that she had been very fortunate to secure a teaching position immediately following her college undergraduate degree. She decided to pursue a graduate degree in school administration the second year she taught. This decision was due to an administrative change in her school. Her first principal provided support. She was inspired by this significant role model and knew that she wanted to continue her studies. In speaking about this former leader, she stated,

She had been my rock. I don't think I realized how much I had relied upon her or how much she had done behind the scenes for me.

She recalled the aggravation, frustration and other issues with her principal's replacement, and she knew deep inside, she could do a better job as an administrator.

Elizabeth recalled the turning point in her studies with clarity. She elaborated,

I wanted to be the person running the school, and I knew, at that moment, that I wanted to give it a shot. The doctorate was just a culmination of my education, which I had not done properly to begin with. I wanted to finish it. I felt like I had not finished it when I should have, so it was important for me to finish it. Even when I wasn't an educated person, I read graciously. I remember realizing when I returned to school that education is a gift. It's a great gift of knowledge and information that the professors shared with me. I soaked it up like a sponge.

Elizabeth's parents graduated from high school; however, both parents came from families with ten children and were the only ones in either family to graduate from high school. She emphasized the strong relationship she had with her mother. This significant person in her life had played such an important role in fostering within her a sense that she should graduate from high school. She added,

It was also ok if I didn't. It wasn't the norm. If I mentioned college ever, my dad would say, "Well, that's for rich people. You can just put that out of your head. That's not going to happen."

During the focus group session, Elizabeth reiterated,

My experience was very different than any that's been described. Both my parents finished high school. My dad dropped out and went back to finish before I was born. Then, I dropped out of high school, and it was eleven years before I finished high school, and at the time I went to college, it was eight years after

that. So, it was eighteen years that I was out of school. I had four children at home, and I will just have to say, I went to the community college first. I had an invitation from them because of my performance on a test that I had taken. After that, I just happened to come into contact with a very caring professor who led me through the rest of my community college experience.

During the focus group, Elizabeth noted differences in her journey and the other women.

She elaborated,

My experience was very different. My parents told me when I would mention college when I was still at home that we couldn't afford it, but I could put it out of my head, so it was never a dream that I was allowed to have. It's a dream that has been fulfilled.

Elizabeth stated that she was never taught to set goals or to have goals; however, she continued to feel that deep desire to shift the cycles of poverty. She added,

Education saved me from a deep dark hole. It felt like a dark hole. The only goal they had was getting a paycheck each week and paying the bills. So for them, if that was good enough for them, it was good enough for me.

During the focus group, Elizabeth elaborated about issues within her own experiences, her aspirations and her family. She continued,

I think for me, who was not allowed to dream about things, there was no goal setting. I didn't know how to set a goal when I was growing up, but I have learned how very fulfilling and satisfying it is to be able to set a goal and to accomplish that goal-just something that simple.

Initially, Elizabeth had done a little bit of everything you could do in furniture and textiles. She worked in sewing, washing yarns, and spinning frames. She also worked in the sand, glue, cabinet and finish rooms. So, Elizabeth knew for sure from experience this [factory job] was not the life cut-out for her. She continued to elaborate on how she was brought up with a really strong work ethic and Baptist belief. She recalled feeling tensions between her family's upbringing and college. She wondered, with some of the assigned readings in class if she should continue to read. They seemed to oppose her conservative roots. In fact, she reported that some of the readings challenged her beliefs to the core. Elizabeth was quick to point out that she was still very firmly grounded in what she believed. There was also a gap between her culture and how women should behave and interact with others. Elizabeth's first experience with college was a private school about two hours from her home. Her husband did not have a regular job at the time, and with the four children, poverty was real. She soon realized the importance of relationships and their impact on her education. She continued,

It was a wonderful place, yet once again, I felt like a fish out of water. We were farming everything we could grow. We canned. We froze food to eat. We kept cows and milked cows. We made our own butter and that sort of thing. So, I felt like people knew all of those things about me, but they had no way of knowing unless I told them. You know, I felt like I stuck out among the people there.

When I started developing relationships, I realized I was not the only one who was there with a struggle at home. I think that was difficult for me at first though. Feeling like I didn't fit. I've had that experience, even now. I feel like an interloper. I look at people who have always had a really strong family support in

childhood for college, and they were encouraged from the time they were young.

I look at that in awe and wonder if those people realize what a great gift they have been given.

While elaborating on the overall learning process throughout her college career, Elizabeth emphasized how she thought the learning was pleasurable. For example, she summarized that when she was taking the child development coursework, and the class discussions led to Piaget or how children develop, she realized that her coursework would help her better understand her own children. In those early days, as a beginning teacher, she remembered sensing the girls in her class who had a problem with an abusive dad, neighbor or someone else who was significant in their lives. She added,

I knew it because I had experienced it. I could tell the mothers who came in who were living in abusive situations because I had experienced it. I could relate to people who had to go to work at the local factory and couldn't come for a parent conference during the school day. Everything that happened to me along the way has made me stronger and has contributed to who I am today. I have to leave it with God and move on as best I can. I think I have been blessed beyond any measure, more than anyone could ever have been. As far as my present life, I guess that says it all. It's just how I feel about things.

Elizabeth's mother passed away a couple of years ago. She recollected,

I didn't talk to her much about my work, and that was only if she asked. It's been important to me that no one thinks I'm trying to get above my raising. I think I've changed a lot. I do think my marriage is stronger. I don't think that other

relationships have changed that much. I worry about my relationships with my children. They are all grown up now.

With sadness in her voice, Elizabeth credits her husband with raising the children and she continued,

Two of my children have turned out the way I wanted, and two have not. I wonder, and I want to go back and think. Maybe it was something that I didn't do because I wasn't there. You know that kind of thing. You worry about that, but you are never really going to know. I've struggled with some aspects of my past over the years, but I've come to grips with them.

During the focus group, as the women were discussing relationships, Elizabeth added,

I still live in the same community where we lived when we milked cows, and we still raise a garden. We have a service role in a small church. We've been in that same role for twenty-one years now. It's been really interesting. They think I can do whatever they want me to do. It's really been interesting, because I love my community members. Many of them are distant relatives, especially my husband's, and some of them have a pride about it. It's associated with their surname, and mine as well. Then, others just don't know what to do with me. You know, they don't know whether to talk to me or whether to invite me to things. They don't know what to do with me, so I'm letting them muddle it through. Mostly, I jump in and help with everything that I can and all that, and it's really interesting how people react to me. I am kind of a detached observer of human behavior most of the time anyway. It's been really funny with those who really don't know what to do with me. If they would ask, I would tell them.

Elizabeth continued to reflect on her desire to be a superintendent. She added,

I want to blame the good old boy system. I'm female. I'm not a young person now. I am just leaving it in God's hands. I think I see myself very clearly.

That's new for me too. You learn how to maneuver the system. Everything I have been able to accomplish has been with the help of the Lord and my own work. I am socially inept. I am an introvert. I am a paid extrovert. When I'm at work, I do what I need to do, but when I go home, I get my greatest recharging from solitude. I could be one of those bitter people that I've met, if I choose to be. But I firmly believe, and I've said this many times, none of us are who we are today minus anything we have experienced in life. Everything makes us who we are and contributes in some way.

During the focus group, Elizabeth, looking at Claire (p. 137) added,

I was able to go back and find a teacher who I had in 7th and 8th grades, and she had no idea the impression she had made on me. Of all the teachers I had along the way, she was the only teacher who seemed to take an interest in me, and you know that means a whole lot. I wanted to make sure she knew that was true, and there are other people to whom I have sent notes and spoken to but I owe some thank yous.

Elizabeth added,

My journey took several years to complete, and at every level there was someone or something that motivated me. My daughter was seventeen and was getting ready to graduate. She was planning to marry following her graduation, but I caught her one night packing her bags. She had a little scholarship. She was



going to go to college. I was just devastated because she never got there. She did finish her Bachelor's last year with six children at home.

Elizabeth interjected,

And then after I got to community college, the professor took an interest in me. I think I have a feminist quality, as well (looking at Claire), but she encouraged me, and she told me all the reasons that I should go on. She helped me with the application. She helped me with the financial aid. She said she was not going with me the first time I went. She didn't feel it would look right for her to show up there with me. She encouraged me to do it on my own. She was the person who motivated me at that stage. Then when I got to the college, there was another professor who was a little woman in her late sixties and who had raised seven or eight children singlehandedly, and was a feminist up one side and down the other. I admired her so greatly. She had a Ph.D. and was so intelligent and was so witty. She was just a character.

**Monica's quilt square.** On the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G), a tenth square depicts a sailboat. The sailboat is a metaphor for Monica's desire to move to the next phase of her life. She is sailing closer to retirement and is excited about the career opportunities ahead. She is a fifty-nine year old Curriculum Coordinator at a regional office near a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. Initially, Monica had been offered a full scholarship at a large West Coast university. She chose, instead, to marry at a young age and became a homemaker. Twelve years passed before Monica returned to the classroom. She describes returning to school as a traumatic, but exciting, adventure. "I remember being really nervous about the whole adventure." She described

her husband as extremely supportive. “He was really encouraging me to do it. He was a big help.” Monica’s experiences with undergraduate coursework were so successful she quickly decided to pursue her master’s degree. She completed that in one year while teaching full-time with a husband and four small children. Her classes met four evenings per week, and she credits financial reward as being the most influential reason for her return to the university. When asked about tensions, she also mentioned the gaps between the university and her upbringing. She elaborated,

The university I attended is very liberal, and that was completely different than my upbringing, which was very conservative. Teaching full-time and trying to get a master’s and then a doctorate was difficult. Finding significant time to do all the assignments, the papers and the research was challenging. Trying to balance time between studies, classes and job was difficult.

In addition to handling issues with the university and family, Monica also had to juggle health concerns as well. She continued,

With the doctoral program, I put on about thirty pounds during those five years, so that was hard. I didn’t have much time to exercise.

When asked about other tensions she experienced, she spoke of family tensions. She mentioned that her husband may have felt a little bit threatened by her advanced degrees and higher level of pay. She continued,

I make more than he does. I have more education than he does, but it hasn’t caused a problem. I feel there is a little bit of, not jealousy, but a little bit of tension.

She mentioned social situations in which people inquire about schooling and it appears to be a stressful topic for him. She then shifted the conversation to her extended family and mentioned issues between herself and her two brothers, neither of whom attended college. As a first-generation doctoral graduate, Monica realizes the impact of building relationships and networking. She elaborated,

I enjoyed learning. I really enjoyed much of the work I had to do. I have always enjoyed learning new things and acquiring new knowledge and greater understanding in curriculum and instruction. All of that was enjoyable. My social network has multiplied. I have certainly met a lot of people in the doctoral program that I did not know before, and I've been able to make more connections. Having the letters behind my name has opened doors. Some people are more willing to listen, and some people are more willing to take my advice about things. I am sad that my mom and dad did not live long enough to see me accomplish any of this, so that's unfortunate, but my brothers did. Since her graduation, Monica's eldest brother did attend to college and earned a master's degree.

Monica is ready to move to the next phase of her life. She shared with me that she is anxiously awaiting a new career at the university close by. Monica is ready to set sail to new waters and new opportunities.

**Kaeti's quilt square.** The eleventh square on the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) depicts a rocking chair. The rocking chair is a timeless metaphor for security. I was in awe of Kaeti's resounding excitement during the interview. She communicated that she is so happy to have found her niche, her passion and her calling in life. Kaeti is a

forty-year old university professor on a large campus in the southeastern United States. She holds a master's degree and a Ph.D. She has no doubt she has found her niche in life. As a socially-gifted individual, she has impressive memories of her first day at the university. She reminisced,

It was middle to late August in 1986. I had a car that I took to college which was about two hours and forty-five minutes from home. One of my best friends and I were rooming together, so she and I filled up my little TC3-Hatchback as full as we could get it and headed off for our big adventure. Neither one of our parents took us. She and I went to our orientation together, and I drove. We arrived, and we had already secured a room placement. You could be off-campus in the air-conditioned dorms, or you could be on-campus in the non-air-conditioned dorms. We elected to go with the air conditioned dorm. At the time, I think the university we attended had three different campuses. We did not stay on the main campus, of course. It was mass chaos. People were everywhere. There were four towers. I am trying to remember how many floors were in each tower. There were possibly three or four floors, and each tower and my room assignment was 4708. I don't know why I know that. The next couple of hours was just getting into line and moving our stuff up to our room on the seventh floor and it was exciting to be in a co-ed tower. It wasn't a co-ed floor. Those didn't exist then. The first few floors were boys, and then, girls were above that. So, it was very exciting that there were boys and girls in our tower. I think that was the only tower that was like that. We got in. We had actually picked matching comforters, and I'm not usually like that. I am a middle child. I always like my own stuff. My roommate

didn't have sisters. She only had a brother, so I bought into it and consented to matching stuff. We picked our beds and got our stuff into the room and unpacked. That was it for me. I went to every room on the floor to introduce myself. I was so happy to be there. I was ready to be at a university. I was very excited to get out of my small town. There were a couple of people sitting in a room and they said, "Oh, come into our room, and we'll hang out." I remember, I was so excited and so happy to be there. I don't remember anything other than that. I got to be very good friends with several people who were on my floor. We stayed very good friends throughout college and some still to this day. With Facebook, it's easy to stay in touch with lots of people. All of my best friends I met that very first day. It was a neat experience. It was thrilling for a young woman who wanted to get away from a very small town and start her adventure.

Kaeti reflected on why she desired a doctorate. She added,

That's how I got into graduate school and then in doctoral school. I had worked within the field of health education for seven years knowing that was part of the plan. I wanted to go to doctoral school so I would be better in my discipline. I wanted to know more as far as theory. I wanted to know about epidemiology, statistical analysis, and the things that I didn't think I could get from a work environment or be able to teach myself. I wanted the additional credibility with a terminal degree. Once I found health education, I knew that was what I wanted to be when I grew up. This is who I am. I have great comfort talking about this subject material. It's information that people desperately need to know. It can be life-saving information. While I was at a southern university, I started taking

women's studies classes and discovered that was really what I wanted my minor in. So, I ended up with a certificate so I could teach women's studies and gender research.

So, that was the path to her doctorate. Kaeti was also coordinating a grant through the Department of Health and Human Services. There were not a large number of health educators seeking a doctorate. She explained how she began asking around and talking to folks that she respected. She then went for a visit and found that they [the university] had what she wanted, which was a doctorate in public health education. She was offered a graduate assistantship, so she packed up and moved to a large southern university.

On finances and the ability to complete a doctorate, Kaeti continued to elaborate,

I had opportunities that I probably would not have had growing up in a rural part of a southeastern state. I grew up in the nineteen eighties. I was telling my mom how my tuition for my first semester was six-hundred dollars. It really makes me bonkers when I hear people say they cannot afford to go to college. It has to be a priority, but you can do it. You can make it happen. I did. I paid for my undergraduate, my master's, and my Ph.D., and I'm still paying and I will be paying for a very long time. But, it's the option that you have. People should never say that they can't do it because you can do it. The hardest part of it all is the finances. I will be paying student loans for a long time. I'm a person with a Ph.D. who doesn't own a home. I can't afford to buy a home with my income to debt ratio. I have a thought on that, too. If I used the same money to buy a house they could repossess the house, but they can't take this away (she points to her diploma). That is one investment that you can't ever lose. If you asked me when

I was seventeen if I would get a Ph.D., I would have said, “Yes,” as long as I could find something that was interesting enough for me to want to do it.

Kaeti realizes the importance of building relationships with educators and the impact these significant people have had on her success. She continued,

I grew up in the southern, rural part of a southeastern state, and I have had great educators in my life. I don’t know that they were the smartest people and I don’t mean that in a negative way, but they were advocates of the students that they worked with. No one ever felt sorry for us. “You poor little kids. You can’t do that.” No one ever said that to us. It was more like, “If you put in the work, you can be anything you want to be,” and I think that resonated with so many of us. I graduated in a class with over one-hundred forty students, and of those one-hundred forty students, there are three of us with a Ph.D., one who is a M.D, two or three with a J.D. and more master’s degrees than I can count. That has to be disproportionate to other same locals to have that many academic successes within that small of a class. I think that really reflects upon the community in which I was raised. I think college is fantastic. I do not think it is for everyone. I think that, depending on people, their abilities, their capabilities, their interests, trade school is fantastic. I think it is a vital part of a successful community.

Kaeti finds her job rewarding as she builds relationships with other faculty members and more importantly, students. She elaborated,

Whoever came up with the phrase that “ignorance is bliss” was brilliant because it really is. Sometimes I think what if I just didn’t know things? How easy would my life be? I wouldn’t feel responsible for social change. I wouldn’t lie in bed at

night worrying about policy change or people not having access to information to services and things like that. I really do, especially when I am most stressed out and things are not going quite well, think how nice that must be. I believe when you are educated that you have opportunities that come with responsibility. I take that responsibility very seriously. If I could have talked to my twenty-year-old self and told her what her life's pattern and work was going to be, the twenty year-old self would have been very excited. I don't think I would have realized how tolling and emotionally exhausting it can be. Here's a great example. I was teaching my general education class with topics such as personal and family health. I teach everything including nutrition, physical activity, weight management, good psychological health, and I save the sex education for last. I was talking about contraception and healthy intimacy, something along those lines, and a male student in the class would get this look on his face. He would put his head in his hands. He was very dramatic about it and I asked, "What's the problem?" And he replied, "I get that we should know this stuff, but shouldn't there be some shame when we are talking about it." And this was in front of the whole class. I asked him why should there be shame when we talk about this? This is normal healthy development. But, it gets more interesting. For the final, I give a multiple choice exam and at the bottom of the exam, so they get an easy five points, there's a reflection question. What did you learn in this class and how will you apply it in the future and in your personal life? And this same student disclosed to me on that reflection item on the exam that he and his girlfriend were expecting their first baby, but still that wasn't enough for him to get why we



should be talking about this stuff. So, that's one of those things that has just resonated within me. For me, this was a very powerful moment.

Kaeti continued to elaborate that she feels her education has allowed her to accomplish a doctorate. She considers herself an expert in her field. She has the ability to do quality research and to speak about things in a clinical way. She also feels her education has taught her to approach topics clinically and with a sense of humor. She finds that it makes her very approachable to students, and if nothing else, she considers herself a resource for them, or she can direct them elsewhere.

I think my education has allowed me to be who I am. If I could be anything else, I would be a fiction writer and make a whole lot of money, but I would still be a sex educator on the side. There's nothing better than my job. I have the best job in the world. I don't always get to do it like I would like to, but as far as what I do for a living, I wouldn't trade it for anything. I am just so blessed that I found it, and it makes me sad when other people don't find their passion in life.

Her journey didn't begin so well and was quite accidental. She elaborated,

I started off in physical therapy. Then I changed my major to athletic training. I really wasn't happy with either of those degrees, and journalism was always something that was very comfortable for me. It wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do, but I needed to get a degree, so I finally changed my degree to journalism. Second semester my junior year, I took my first health education class. I fell in love. I found my passion and discovered that you could make a career out of health education. At the time, my college did not have an undergraduate degree in health education, so I continued to work on my degree in journalism and kept

taking health education classes. My advisor would say, “You must stop taking these classes,” and I would say, “But, these are my favorite classes.”

Kaeti continued to explain about being introduced to her ultimate field of study.

Additionally, she served on the university’s Alcohol and Other Drug Advisory Committee, and knew she had to go to graduate school for health education. Because of the work that she had done, she was awarded a graduate assistantship and continued her journey to get a master’s degree in health education from the School of Medicine. She found that she had an extraordinary comfort level talking about things that other people considered taboo. She reiterated that she thought it was enjoyable and engaging and she really liked the health element. She found that health, the human body and mechanics to be very interesting. Even though Kaeti started out building relationships on campus, she felt a disconnect with Greek life. When it came to rushing, all of her friends rushed. She added,

However, as far as her family was concerned, we just didn’t have the money. It wasn’t even an option to think about it. However, rather than saying to people, “I can’t afford this. I can’t afford the fees. I can’t afford the parties. I can’t afford the dresses. I am not interested in rushing. I am not interested in being in a sorority,” I was very negative about the whole Greek system. It was because of my own inability to rush. It makes me sad that’s who I was, but that was how I approached it. I now think it was very immature and dishonest. It’s really important to be honest.

Kaeti enjoyed university life and learning new things. She attributes her success to one humanities professor and other relationships she built along the way. She continued,

I am a life-long learner. I love to learn, and I remember taking my very first humanities class. I have never had a class like that, and that's not really how my brain works. I like English. I like science. I like things like that. I don't deal so much with art and abstract concepts, but I had a really great professor who introduced me to the humanities. I don't remember her name, but her class made me want to take a second humanities class. That's a big deal. Being able to be exposed to new ideas was huge for me. My university had approximately twenty to twenty-two thousand students at the time, and that's a lot of students, but it was a community. It is very different now. That was twenty-five to twenty-six years ago, and we felt very safe. I don't know if we were very safe. There was a sense of safety, community and an incredible sense of freedom, which I had been looking for a long time.

Kaeti explained that, at the time, she felt she needed to get out of the hometown where she grew up. She enjoyed being exposed to broader ideas. Back then, she would say that her university was certainly not the most diverse, but the desire to want to learn more, be more, and do more resonated. That's when she first started to travel outside of her state. She would visit cities with friends and realized that she liked large eastern cities. She also realized some of the opportunities. And then, of course, finding health education was the ultimate surprise. Kaeti's parents are very proud of her. Her dad graduated from high school in 1947 and her mom got her General Education Development (GED) certificate after she and her dad married and after all three girls were born. She continued,

They have been nothing but advocates for me to pursue whatever degree I wanted to pursue. I'm not sure that they understand, and they have no idea what I do for a living and the first time I gave my mom one of my business cards and she said, "Assistant? You're somebody's assistant?" I replied, "No, mom. It's the structure of higher education. I'm an assistant professor. Hopefully one day, I'll be an associate professor and then I'll be a full professor. It's a label for a tier."

Kaeti explained that her parents know she teaches health education and they know she teaches sex education. Her dad loves to call her the "doc." He's almost eighty-three.

Kaeti also has an older sister received an undergraduate degree. Her younger sister married while her spouse was in the military. She explained that she met most of her best friends while in college, so she can't think of any real implications for college and relationships, except, perhaps those of the intimate kind. She continued to explain that she believes it's probably scary for a significant other to know that she is a sex educator.

It's a bit intimidating. I tell people when I meet them for the first time, depending on where I am, that I'm an assistant manager at a boot store because sometimes you just don't want to say, "Hey I'm a sex educator!" First of all, there are all the questions. Sometimes if you're with a certain group of people, they don't want to know that's what you do for a living. It started when I was in doctoral school.

I'm content with my place in life and that's my standing joke.

On the structure of higher education, Kaeti continued,

So that's another really big one, and as I've gotten older and gotten into graduate school, masters and Ph.D., I've really struggled with the whole hierarchical structure of higher education. I feel like there is a lot of hoop jumping involved in

our systems. In fact I was just having this conversation with someone yesterday, how it is so interesting to me the way we measure someone's success at least for me is going through my doctoral program. I was locked in a room for two days and I had to answer eight questions without any resources with a computer in front of me and so the measure of my success was how well I could memorize things. By then, all I wanted to do was to be through with it. I didn't put a lot of thought into it, but you do what you've got to do.

Kaeti paused and added,

I am an assertive woman living in the south from the south, and that constantly and persistently has created tension for me with colleagues and with supervisors and with students because they don't quite know how to respond to an assertive southern woman. When I turned 40, I had an epiphany. I decided, if people kept telling me to be quieter or to be this way or that way, I would say, "This is it. Take it or leave it." If it bothers people, it's their stuff and not mine. I needed to let it go, and that's always been a thing. I am a gregarious outspoken person who loves to teach sex education, and that makes some people very uncomfortable.

Kaeti had her own struggles with money. She started off with an academic scholarship.

She stated that it was probably as much her fault as anybody else's. She continued,

I never got any counseling in my high school about how to manage money, how to manage scholarships, how to manage student loans or to make sure I had adequate money to get me through the year. My parents just had no idea and they really weren't involved. When I started college, I had an older sister who was enrolled at another university, and my dad was a car salesman. This was 1986 in

a very rural area of a southeastern state. There was so very little money coming into the household. I didn't ask them for money. That was a real struggle for me. I lost my academic scholarship after my first semester because I got a 2.8 and I needed a 3.0 to maintain it. During my sophomore year, I got a job, and I worked the rest of the way through college, so that helped. However, it was an ongoing struggle. Every single semester I had to make sure I had enough money to go to school, and that was the hardest thing. Academically, it was interesting to have more challenging classes. I liked that, but I didn't like how the general education was set up. It seemed very random to me. I struggled with some of my general education classes. I just couldn't get to where the connectedness was where I was going and I struggled because I didn't know where I wanted to be. I didn't know where I fit in as far as the academics went. In hindsight, I would have been a great candidate to take a year off, if at that time we had the opportunity that students do now, but there was nothing else for me to do. Had I taken a year off, in a southern town, it would not have been good. However, I wasn't ready. I had never had any career counseling. I had never had anything to help me figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up, so that and the financial element were the most challenging parts of being at school.

Kaeti continued to reflect on tensions in college. She continued to feel a significant gap between the culture of the university and her upbringing. She elaborated,

This is one of my embarrassing stories. I was taking a history class, and I was terrible in history, so I took three or four history classes, and then, I would drop them. I did so poorly, and I never had any interest. History didn't appeal to me.

There was an African-American professor who had a strong northern mid-western accent. When he would speak, I had a very difficult time understanding him. Kaeti explained that it just sounded like several words put together and she could not understand the professor. She would go back to her dorm, and she would spell it phonetically and still didn't understand what he had been saying. She continued,

It was awful, because when I read the textbook, I realized he was speaking about Malcolm X. There was such a disconnect for me there. It was a real struggle and it embarrassed me. It made me feel less than, because I felt I was just a small town girl. I didn't want to be a small town girl. That was probably the biggest tension.

Even though Kaeti arrived on campus and she relished the social aspects, she also experienced her share of tensions as well. As the rocking chair symbolizes conversations and serves as an icon for interpersonal relationships, building relationships was the key in assisting Kaeti in overcoming obstacles, securing her aspirations and realizing her dreams.

**Claire's quilt square.** On the Journey Quilt, the fourth square (see Appendix G), depicts a tall loblolly pine. Claire is a 58-year-old central office administrator in the southeastern United States. As I interviewed Claire, I was reminded of this symbol of strength and perseverance. As Claire began to recant her recollections of her entry into the university, she started,

It was a long drive from one end of the state to the other. My uncle and his wife had both attended school at the university where I was enrolled. They were pretty much my role models. I decided that was where I would go to kind of keep the

family tradition going. It was a long day. We left the night before. In fact, we arrived at six AM in the morning. We did get a hotel room.

Claire elaborated about her cousin from New York who traveled with them to take her to college. She was one year older than Claire and had spent the summer with her. Claire stated that they were really close to her campus. Leaving her cousin was like separating from a sister. Claire's brother was in the military, and he was stationed in a neighboring state. By attending college, she was actually moving closer to him. The relationship with her brother was a strong one, and she attributes this as one of the factors of her success. She continued,

We just got there as soon as the campus opened for the students to check in. My parents were anxious to get me there. They wanted to head back home since it was such a long drive. Then I just recall finding the dorm and taking my stuff up the stairs. I was in an old dorm for freshmen girls. There were three or four floors. I was on the third floor, and we had to carry everything up the stairs. It was real popular back in the day to have a trunk. You stored some of your things there and used it as a table or whatever at the foot of your bed. I remember getting all that stuff in, and then my parents just saying, "We've got to get going. We have a long travel back." And I was kind of like, "You all are going to just leave me here? I didn't know how far away I was until I got there." Even just in walking to the car, there were other freshmen girls who were there. They were doing the same thing. They were saying goodbye to their families.



Claire credits many role models, including her mother, to her success. She added,

In growing up, I was very fortunate to have teachers as role models. You know, I was growing up in the day when you attended the neighborhood school of course. Your teachers were your church members, Sunday School teachers, Bible School teachers, and Girl Scout leaders. My mother has always been the pillar. She is my motivation just for being a woman. Seeing these professional women and all the things that they are able to do helped me even more.

Claire has always been involved in ensuring social justice. She elaborated,

I have always been an activist, a social activist. And that's still very important to me. I still have to work on not becoming angry when people are not treated fairly. Everything is not always equal, but it is important to me that we be fair and consistent with everybody. But, when I see that's not happening, I get really, really concerned. As a young person, I was always involved in high school issues such as making sure there were fair opportunities for everyone. I organized a walkout one time in high school because we thought the administration wasn't listening. I can recall growing up when my parents were very involved in the Civil Rights Movement and how, on Sunday evenings, they would go downtown to picket or protest at the movie theater and how much I wanted to go and I wasn't able to go. It was always important to me that there was this fairness and equity thing and I am always about treating everyone fairly. That's still difficult for me, even now, to make sure that people are treated fairly, and sometimes that just doesn't happen.

Claire's father was also very involved in the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), in which he served as President. Claire added,

My parents never pushed me for the A's and the B's. That was just my autonomous motivation. I just wanted to do it. I didn't get paid. We didn't have a kindergarten available, so my parents enrolled me in a private kindergarten, which was church-based. I was the valedictorian. As a five-year-old, I recited the one-hundredth Psalm with a microphone. I don't know why I was chosen. I just led the line and all that stuff. Those are things that you do, just because of who you are. No one pushed me. I wasn't trying to please anyone. I have always been a hard-worker. I believe in bringing your best into any situation. I don't shy away. I don't point blame. It's not because of what you did or did not do. Rather than wallow in the misery, I understand my past now.

Claire noted that a lot of people have been very much a part of her life as she has continued to maintain connections with others. She elaborated,

Distance has moved us apart, but I think we are still connected even though we are apart. My high school best friend is now the State Secretary of Education for a northeastern state. When you saw one, you saw the other one. We lived about four houses apart. We grew up together. She was the maid of honor at my wedding. We are in the same sorority. We still have this real connection.

Concerning family relations, Claire continued,

I think if any relationships have changed, it's like you are not aware that people are staying away from you or people view you differently. You know, some of my family members defer everything to me because they think I know everything.

They are far wiser than I ever will be. I just have the formal education, but they think that I have to be the one to make the decisions. “You’ve got to be the one to do this. You went to college, and you got a degree.” They have far more wisdom. I don’t know if the relationships have changed. I just think people view us in a different way. They think that we must be really smart people. “If you want something done, or you want to know about something, just ask her.”

During the focus group, Claire revisited the relationships within her family and how everything gets deferred to her because she has earned a higher degree. Claire added,

Well, my experiences have been just a tad bit different. That’s because I don’t really think about it as to what you have and what your education is. There are so many people who are much wiser than I, and they have so many different talents, and they bring so many different things to the table. I just see them as being really significant in our lives. My experiences with my family and my friends are such that they think, “You should be able to do everything.” When they want to plan something, it’s me. “She should know how to do it. She is the college educated one.” When something needs to be done, “Call her, for she knows how to do it.” I always end up with the higher expectations. “She is the one that went to college. She should know.” It’s even like that at church. They ask me, because I’m the doctor. You know, I think they probably think that I can even do surgery. They just think, “Because you had some advanced training and you know it all, you can do it.” I don’t know it all. I want them to teach me. But they think, I am the Superwoman. I’m the one they call on. It’s not done in a mean way. It’s not done in a way that you know it all.

Despite Claire's success as an educator, she has also faced many obstacles, but she has persevered. She elaborated,

It's always difficult when you are in a position and you are the only one who looks like you. I've been in those places before. You are either the first one doing it, or you are the only one doing it. When I started as a speech pathologist, there were no other African-American women. There were women, but no African-American women. Then with my first principalship, I was the only African-American woman. It's like sometimes you are always by yourself. I don't know if there are any tensions there. It's just a different experience.

When reflecting on how she chose her career, Claire described a relationship that developed between one of her professors and her. This significant mentor helped her make critical decisions, which led to her success. She stated,

I had worked with the school newspaper. I wanted to be a journalist, and travel the world and report, and I thought it would be so glamorous. My uncle who was an English teacher said, "You are not going to make any money writing anything." But, I thought that was the most glamorous thing a person could do and be able to see the world. But, somewhere along my freshman year, I had this meeting for English majors to tell us about this new career. It was speech pathology, and I didn't know anything about it. I went to hear the sales pitch and about lots of opportunity. It was becoming one of the premier professions. They didn't have a major in speech pathology, but they did have the prerequisite courses to get you into graduate school. So, I decided to find out more about it. I

began to pursue the program of study to get into speech pathology as a future career.

During Claire's junior year of college, was a lady who had been on faculty at a neighboring university. She was teaching one of the courses of anatomy or physiology of speech. She just immediately embraced Claire. She encouraged her to take a look at graduate school. Claire continued to elaborate that this significant mentor in her life was so insistent that she even called the chair of the department. By her senior year of college, her mentor had her whole graduate study planned, plus an assistantship paid in full. All Claire had to do was show up. She credits her success to a "lot of help from other people." She also added that it involved a lot of hard work on her part because she always worked hard to try to prove herself. She had to get into graduate school because she knew she would not be able to be as successful without this graduate degree in speech pathology. She liked the fact that it was something new. She was daring to be different. She didn't want to be like everybody else. She wanted to be on the cutting edge and was motivated to persevere. She continued,

I was an English major but decided I really wanted to do more with the speech pathology side. The only option was to go to graduate school. There was a professor at my undergraduate school who encouraged me and talked to me. She helped me get the scholarship. I don't even recall filling out the application. I am sure I did, but I don't recall it because she was so pushy to get me into that level. And that kind of spearheaded me to get going in that direction. So, I graduated in May and worked a little that summer. Then I headed to a neighboring state on the

east coast to graduate school. In the fall, I started graduate school. That was my first desire to get a graduate degree.

On motivation Claire added,

I have always been a person that felt like I could change the world. My parents will tell you I was always in something. If there was a rally for/against a cause, I was there. I was always having that fight. I have always had the motivation to do the best that you can do. I have always been motivated to always put yourself forward and to be on the cutting edge. That has always been a part of who I am, even as a young child. If something is going on, I want to be in on it. How do I join? How can I become a member? And not only be a member, but how can I be the leader of the group? So that was always me. That was my motivation.

Claire reflected on the social life of the university and the process of building relationships. It was the process of building relationships and making those connections that were so critical to her success. She continued,

I always enjoy meeting new people. I love people. There's a different culture in different parts of the state. Different areas have different cultures. So, getting to experience how different people live. I traveled home at Thanksgiving and at Christmas and then for summer break. So, everything in between, I was in my friends' homes getting to experience how they lived, just learning new things, and just being independent. That was such a great experience. Learning to be independent and then having that opportunity to be involved. I was involved in everything. I was initiated into a sorority my sophomore year. So, that keeps you really busy. I was in the student government, and that kept me very busy. I love

to dance, so I enjoyed being able to attend dances. All of those things were pleasurable experiences. I still enjoy my sorority as an alumna. I serve as the chapter president now for the third time. I've served as a state officer, so I am really involved and doing those kinds of things.

Claire added that she loves to dance. She is currently learning every line dance, and she adds that all of these activities are pleasurable experiences for her. She elaborates,

I just love learning new things. I am autonomously motivated. When I do something well and I know I have done it well, I am pleased with myself. I am not one of those people who need a whole lot of patting on the back. But, I realize when I have done something well or when I have achieved. When I find a shortcut to do something, I am pleased with myself.

Claire also found that juggling activities through her school career could become quite difficult at times. As a person who enjoys social activities, she had to ensure she was not too involved in this or that. She continued,

I had to pay attention to the academic piece of the puzzle. That is, going to class rather than trying to organize something or be in something. I've always been an involved person, and that takes up quite a bit of time.

As a group, the women agreed to inform those who have influenced their trajectory in life and have become role models and inspirations to them along their journeys. Claire began,

There are just so many people along the way that kind of guide you in the right direction, and they just seem to be at the right place at the right time. There are even some younger people, and they looked at me as their mentor and they helped

me so much. They give you such encouragement just wanting to be in your presence and wanting to talk to you. There were so many people along the way. I guess if I charted a course every so many years along the way, there are so many people who you come in contact with. It's been so important to me.

Claire added that one thing she is going to do is take the time to let people know the influence they have had. She stated that "sometimes they don't know because we don't tell them." She remembers the point when they came into her life. During the focus group, she added,

So, I thank you for this opportunity today because it brings back to memory how important they were, whether they know it or not. And, of course, my parents are in that group. They were always there for me. My mom was the first one to teach my brother and me how to stand up and speak. You know it was always, "It's not the, that, those and them." You know, I can remember that she taught me how to speak. We would talk about not wanting to go to church, not wanting to do presentations and we would say, "There's not going to be anyone there." Her favorite statement was, "Oh, there will be two. . .you and your brother." So, we were always the ones who had to give reports from some camp that we attended, but that helped develop us into the people we became. So, there are a lot of people along the way who helped too with courage and my trajectory. They need to know how important they were. Some people do not even know what I am doing now. I think I am going to do this thing like Oprah, you know, the Legends. There are not that many, but they are very important. That way, they can know how important they are.



The purpose of this chapter was to describe the results of the data provided by the interviews and focus group. The chapter included interviews and focus group responses from the female participants. A detailed description of the findings was revealed. The Journey Quilt (See Appendix G) was introduced with each square representing one of the women, except for numbers five and eight. The fifth square depicts the title of the quilt: The Journey Quilt. The eighth square represents the bittersweet journey of the women: rain amidst the rise and fall of the lovely mountain ranges.

As recommended by Wolcott (1994), during the final chapter, the reader will find a detailed analysis and interpretation of the data which will include an overview of the four main themes. The four significant themes are: 1) relationships, 2) autonomous motivation, 3) finances and 4) disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university. Chapter Five will also include a section on the implications and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ANALYSIS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY**

This study, “Finding Our Voices: The Bittersweet Journey of a Dream for First-Generation Female Doctoral Graduates” included ten women who met the criteria for first-generation and through the process of network sampling were invited to participate in this study. The study looked closely at the “lived experiences” of first-generation female students who have navigated through an undergraduate degree, graduate degree and a doctoral degree (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727). The interpretation adopted by U.S. Department of Education TRIO programs states that graduates are considered first generation if neither parent graduated from a four-year college or university. This personal narrative was foundationally built around the paradigms of constructivism and feminism and initiated with three research questions, as implemented in research conducted by Jackson and Mazzei (2012), and which guided the direction of the research:

1. What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant’s decision to pursue doctoral studies?
2. How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate?
3. What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education?

During this chapter a robust discussion of the four themes will be included and will be intertwined with the three research questions. The purpose of this study was to

look more closely at the life events/experiences, decisions, entry and persistence of first-generation female doctoral students. In order to ensure triangulation, data collection for this particular study included: 1) individual interviews, 2) focus group session and 3) document review. The focus group was originally planned to ensure corroboration of stories and member-checking. These occurred, however the focus group also ensured triangulation and provided an outlet for a level of co-constructing that was, indeed, powerful. To further enhance the richness of the study, documents which were reviewed included: 1) interview transcriptions, 2) subjectivity journal notes (see Appendix E) and 3) focus group transcription. “In qualitative research. . .you learn something (collect some data), then you try to make sense (analysis), then you go back and see if the interpretation makes sense in light of new experiences (focus group). . .then you refine your interpretation (more analysis) and so on. This process is dialectic, not linear” (Agar, 1980, p. 9). In the next section, a detailed analysis of the frameworks will be provided as a precursor to the analysis of the study which includes a description of the four significant themes.

### **Analysis of the Frameworks**

Feminist studies employ personal narratives or other forms of inquiry that draw the audience into a “special relationships with the reader” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 240). “Understanding the experience of women from their own point of view corrects a major bias of non-feminist participant observation that trivializes women’s activities and thoughts, or interprets them from the standpoint of the men in the society or of the male researcher” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 52). Constructivism allowed the women to construct and co-construct their own understandings of events and memories, and, thus, minimized the

risk of researcher bias. For example, I wasn't certain feminism would be highlighted at all. During the interview sessions, the women did not mention feminism. However, during the focus group, the women were able to co-construct meanings in such a way that feminism moved to the forefront.

### **On Being Women and Co-Constructing: The Stitching of the Quilt**

The women's stories began as individual, isolated stories. They were represented by a unique metaphor that symbolized their individual journey. However, as the women came together during the focus group, their stories were no longer isolated. Throughout the weaving of stories as an outcome of this study, the similarities are astounding, to say the least.

The opportunity consistently arose for one woman to assist in gleaning additional information from another woman as issues and/or events introduced themselves that weren't mentioned in the one-on-one interview session. The goals were fulfilled; however, another important and unexpected outcome evolved during the focus group session. Feminism took center stage during the focus group. These unexpected moments in qualitative research are imperative so that the researcher can ensure her subjectivity and biases are nonexistent. As the unexpected occurred, the women's voices blended and joined one another; however, the women also began co-constructing meaning to their significant events, memories and feelings about being a first-generation woman in the home, workplace and in academe. Also, as a constructivist, I had imagined the women would possibly use the opportunity to construct meaning for themselves; however, I had not expected the level of co-constructivism that occurred. During the focus group, not only did the women construct meaning of events along their journey, but they also

astutely co-constructed together as they joined their voices. They found both similarities and differences within their stories; however, they discovered and co-constructed new insights into both their individual and collaborative journey. For example, Rose looked at Elizabeth during the focus group session and said, “This is where my voice joins your voice.” An example when the members noted differences in their stories was evident as Elizabeth pointed out during the focus group session, “Here again, my voice is different than any voice here but having four children at home was a tremendous obstacle.”

Several participants mentioned divorce, working as a single mom, dealing with power struggles, as well as juggling home, work and study responsibilities. They mentioned issues in the workplace, but they never really mentioned the fact that these issues occurred because they are a woman. However, when the women came together, the collaboration was phenomenal. As the women co-constructed, they were, in essence, joining their individual quilt squares, their individual voices, their individual events and their individual stories.

During the interview sessions, the women often mentioned their duties and multiple roles as wife, mother, daughter, homemaker, teacher and/or administrator. During the focus group session, the women had the opportunity to co-construct meaning and thus, realized the impact of being a first-generation woman, plus all the additional roles for which they are responsible. During the focus group session several of the women mentioned the fact that they are feminists, which allowed the women to co-construct their own femininity and metaphorically stitch each quilt square with the threads of feminism. As the women were co-constructing (within the paradigms of constructivism) and stitching their individual quilt square together (within the paradigms

of feminism), the quilt squares assembled into a beautiful work of art, the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G). On the topics of feminism and motivation, Claire elaborated,

I think I've always been a feminist because girls rock. They run the world. They rule the world. So, my motivation has always been those women around me. Then, when you look around you at work every day and you see all these men running the world and you say, "I can do that! I can do that better!" That has always been my motivation. "I can do that! Maybe I can do it better, and I'm going to try this." I am just thinking that girls rock. We get attention, so, why not? Move forward and get it done. That's always been my motivation.

During the focus group session Elizabeth interjected, "I think I have a feminist quality, as well (looking toward Claire)." Rose shared,

My daughter inspires me. I probably would not have gone on and done the Ed.S. and the Ed.D. without her in the background saying, "Well you can do this and you can do that. You're a woman." I raised a little feminist from the time she was two on and didn't intend to. It was just the subliminal. I was always saying, "You can do anything you want to do. You can be anything you want to be." But, when you say that, as the momma, she turns it back around on you, you see. Then, you have to do what you need to do and you can be who you need to be. I think that she thinks I could rule the world just as Claire said.

On her grandmother's feminist influence, Rose continued,

She was a very positive role model, probably the most positive female role model inside my family that I have. She was a feminist and didn't know she was, so I'm

probably a feminist. I knew that she was a woman, in my opinion, who could certainly do any job, at least as well, and sometimes better than anyone else.

During the interviews, the individual stories unraveled in the silence of the room, yet during the focus group, their voices blended in complete harmony. As the researcher, at times, I was overcome by utter astonishment at the intensity of the resounding isolation, yet joint communion. Once the women's stories took wings, my own story, as well as my own voice, took flight. As I basked in the utter amazement of the women's stories, I continued to reflect on my own connections to the stories I heard. In writing memos. . .these also assisted in capturing analytical thoughts about the data and aided in "facilitating such thinking and stimulating analytic insights" (Maxwell, 2009, p. 96). The subjectivity journal (see Appendix F) was also significant as a piece of raw data in that it provided "descriptions, direct quotations and observer comments" (Merriam, 2009, p. 137). The process of keeping a subjectivity journal allowed the researcher to step aside and reflect. Additionally, this process aided in ensuring researcher bias was not an issue.

### **The Process of Analysis**

Glesne (2011) states that, in this type of analysis, the researcher searches through the data for themes and patterns. In order to fully and accurately understand the experiences of the women's stories and to ensure a thorough process of generating theory from the raw data, the researcher implemented inductive thematic analysis to assist with identifying the patterns, categories, and themes within the data. The initial stage of inductive thematic analysis began with data collection. Then, the second stage focused on transcribing and organizing data into categories. As each interview was completed, I personally transcribed the data, in order to be fully aware of the spoken words for each

interview and focus group. Gibbs (2007) adds that, during this process, one is able to explore how these categories or themes represented by the codes varied on a case-by-case basis from one setting to another and/or one event to another event. The researcher's transcription, her reading and re-reading of the data further complimented the process.

Glesne (2011) describes qualitative inductive thematic analysis as beginning with broad, open-ended questions and by the allowing the opportunity for the interviewee to tell her story. "You can explore how categorizations or thematic ideas represented by the codes vary from case to case, from setting to setting, or from incident to incident" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 48).

Finding the main ideas is the beginning of qualitative inductive thematic analysis. In each corresponding cell, you would summarize the coded material; sometimes using parts of quotations, but keeping it short, at this point, focusing only on the main ideas. Comparing cells can begin to trigger questions about relationships of the aspects you have selected and send you back to your data or to making other kinds of comparisons charts/tables. Making comparisons is an analytical step in identifying patterns within some theme. Looking for patterns tends to focus attention on unifying aspects of the culture or setting, on what people usually do and with whom they usually interact. Thematic analysis goes beyond identifying the general or the norm. A strength of qualitative research is that it can help reveal underlying complexities (Glesne, 2011, p. 188)



When over-arching themes emerged, I noted similarities and differences in the data collected. I noted trends, similarities and differences in each woman's journey as they emerged from one interview to the next. Maxwell (2009) also points out several options for organizing thematic analysis. Significant themes were dynamic throughout the research process. As a researcher, it is tempting to discard passages that appear contradictory or convoluted. "These in particular, however, have to be kept in the foreground lest researchers exercise their own biased subjectivity, noticing and using only materials that support their own opinions" (Kvale, 1996, p. 212). As I poured over the raw data, the stories were kept in their entirety.

Feldman (1995) highlights a form of analysis which assists with creating meaning. This type of analysis focuses the researcher's attention to opposites, which are embedded throughout the women's stories. Initially, after I had completed the transcriptions and re-read those multiple times, I created a plus/delta chart which categorized opposites. For each interview, all words and phrases from the original transcripts were hand-written and organized onto a plus-delta chart. I had the choice of cutting the text from the transcripts or writing each comment on the chart. Exhibiting a strong visual learning style, I chose to write each comment so I could appropriately visualize the text on the plus-delta from a holistic point of view. Following hours of documenting each comment and phrase, the data was then read and re-read so that I could absorb each comment, phrase or piece of text from an oppositional point of view.

Each phrase or comment from the plus-delta was then recorded on, literally, one of hundreds of slips of paper. I generated categories from the raw data for each individual transcription. The initial categories revolved around the interview questions

and the trends of the raw data. Initially, all individual phrases and comments were grouped into seven categories. Folders were created which I referred to as trend folders. Throughout the process, the researcher transcribed, defined opposites, handwrote hundreds of slips of paper with phrases/comments and then placed the slips of paper in trend folders. Codes and sub-codes were established.

Due to the massive task of analyzing raw data for a qualitative study and in order to establish a more efficient system, I implemented *Microsoft Office 2010* to create coding tables. These tables allowed me to list the comments and phrases from the small slips of paper onto the computer-generated coding tables. These tables also allowed me to read and re-read the text holistically. I was then able to highlight common patterns and themes which began to consistently emerge. No phrase or sentence was omitted by the researcher. As the coding tables evolved, I noted major patterns, themes and sub-themes. The initial categories, which related directly to the interview questions and focus group coding process, evolved. Initially, the major categories were determined by the questions. I started out with the following: 1) + relationships; 2) – tensions; 3) + autonomous motivation; 4) - navigating systems; 5) + navigating systems; 6) + mentors; 7) + benefits. As I coded and then created sub-codes, this process helped lead to the four overarching categories or themes. These categories shifted and changed and produced four major themes, as outlined in the next section. The four main themes that emerged as a result of the study were: 1) relationships, 2) autonomous motivation, 3) finances, and 4) disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university. Table 3 provides a synopsis of the major themes and sub-themes that emerged from this study.

Table 3

Synopsis of Themes/Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Relationships	Mentors Role Models Socialization Colleagues Family Support or lack thereof Divorce/Power Socialization High School support University support Responsibilities
Autonomous Motivation	Intrinsic Motivation
Finances	Poverty
Disconnects	Disconnections within family, work and educational systems (Includes the following, but is not limited to the following): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation</li> <li>• College Applications</li> <li>• Registration</li> <li>• Housing</li> <li>• Financial Aid</li> <li>• Managing study loads</li> <li>• Loneliness/Intrapersonal</li> <li>• Family Issues/Misunderstandings</li> <li>• Work Issues</li> </ul>

Research is a “means of organizing our thoughts to reach understanding, not an end in itself-the idea of finally finding a way to interpret one’s data, or suddenly realizing how to go about reinterpreting it, denotes the possibility of fresh insight or a long-awaited breakthrough” (Wolcott, 1994, pp. 37-39). Since several of the themes were unexpected or surprises, if you will; it was then my obligation to return to the literature review. In returning to the literature review, I noticed gaps in the literature and re-visited this section. For example, I was certain university cohorts, socialization, and high school support would be outcomes of the study. These were originally sections of the literature review; however, they did not emerge from the study as significant themes. A couple of the women mentioned social clubs, sororities, and campus support groups; however, socialization did not emerge as a significant theme. Nikki was a member of the Baptist Student Union (BSU) for a short while. Kaeti indicated that she could not afford the Greek society; however, Claire became a member of a sorority. She stated,

I always enjoy meeting new people. I love people. There’s a different culture in different parts of the state. Different areas have different cultures. So, getting to experience how different people live was enjoyable. I was always in my friends’ homes getting to experience how they lived, just learning new things, and just being independent. That was such a great experience.

On the subject of university cohorts, only one woman mentioned that model as “powerful”. Most of the women had moved further beyond the doctoral program, than I. This idea refers to limited location and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991, p. 188).

Additionally, as researchers, we

acknowledge our partiality and how it affects our research, but also accounts for this partiality in the text in order to make the text more comprehensible and responsible. This poststructuralist perspective allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints and encourages feminist researchers to make the power relations between the researcher and the researched according to sex, race/ethnicity and age, more explicit (Essers, 2009, p. 170).

Therefore, due to my own personal location, as a member of a university cohort, I believed cohorts would emerge as a theme, since my location recently allowed me to be a part of a university cohort. It made perfect sense that cohorts did not emerge as a theme because as I reflected on the women's Demographic Questionnaire and the interview data, I realized each woman's location was very different. Only one woman was a recent member of a cohort and that one individual mentioned cohorts as "powerful."

An additional surprise was the subject of power in relationships. I figured this topic would emerge as a significant theme. Only one woman mentioned power. She said, "It was power all the way down." Due to the women's previous or current location, power was not a significant issue in their lives. Surprises, such as these, with the data were a signal to me that my own biases and pre-conceived notions about the results were not an issue. The data tell the women's story. My own subjectivity was expanded as a result of the data. Initially, I had also considered downsizing the perspective of feminism because I did not think it would tie in with the data. Again, I was surprised. During the focus group, the women spoke specifically about feminism within their families, their

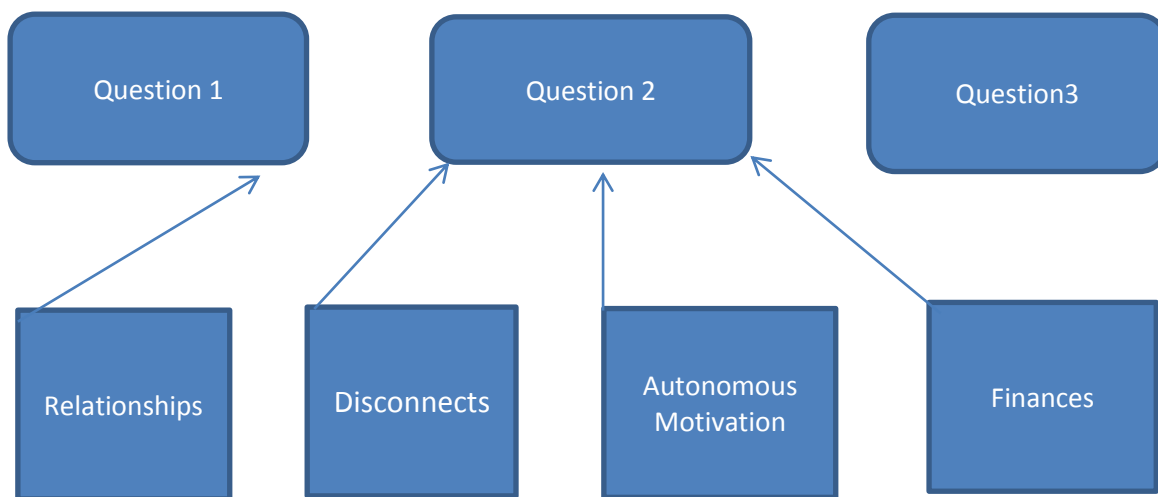
biological children and themselves. The individual voices connected during the focus group, and the women were able to co-construct and stitch together the metaphorical Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) squares using the metaphorical threads of feminism.

As I was gathering data, these categories of literature shifted and changed. “A qualitative researcher makes myriad choices in looking at some things rather than others, in taking note of some things rather than others, and in subsequently reporting some things rather than others. In the analytical mode, that process becomes increasingly selective as some of the data now receive most of the attention” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 29).

Figure 1 depicts the four significant themes aligned with three main research questions.

Figure 1

The Four Significant Themes Aligned with Research Questions



1. What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies?
2. How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate?
3. What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education? (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012)

I was able to analyze the connections between the research questions, interview transcriptions, focus group transcription, subjectivity journal notes and their connections to each theme. Each participant comment and phrase was important, and no words were discarded. A Synopsis of Statements/Phrases by Participants to address research questions was provided (see Appendix H).

Additionally, in the following section, a comprehensive discussion of the literature review, the themes and their connection to the three main research questions shall be provided. The four significant themes that emerged during this study were: 1) relationships, 2) autonomous motivation, 3) finances, and 4) disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university.

### **Analyzing the Findings**

***Research Question One.*** What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies?

Students who are women are at an even higher disadvantage than their male counterpart, and are at an even greater risk because this sub-group is compared to those who are "pushing the boulder uphill" (Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004, p. 418). With

the first-generation female student, the metaphor of the hill and boulder can be even more significant. Women face significant personal challenges, related to gender, in their determined efforts to complete a degree of advanced study. Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) report that even though some women feel empowered by the doctoral journey, others tend to lose themselves throughout the process. Walters (2005) states that modern day women are torn between possibilities and reality in a difficult and uncharted future. Even though higher education may be an entryway to a better social and economic class and “lifetime stability,” many students are unable to see the “light at the end of the tunnel” (Terenzini, et.al., 1996, p. 2). Moyer, Salovey and Casey-Cannon (1999) state that women are more likely to express concerns ranging from issues with a lack of female role models in the professorship to other problems related to being female as reasons to not pursue the doctorate. Effective female role models are essential to the women’s success in the program. Austin, Cameron, Glass, Kosko, Marsh, Abdelmagid, and Burge (2009) additionally states that the advisors’ lack of support contributes significantly to the majority of doctoral candidates not completing the doctoral dissertation. Based on the work of Katz and Hartnett (1976), the relationship with faculty is key to the successful completion of a doctoral degree. This literature all points toward a significant theme that surfaced: relationships. In order to analyze the women’s responses in relation to this question, a Synopsis of Statements/Phrases by Participants to Address Research Questions was implemented (see Appendix H).



***Relationships.*** A theme which surfaced during this study was the importance of building positive relationships during high school and college which ensured persistence through higher education. As the themes began to emerge, shift and change, I was once again obligated to return to the literature section and revisit the topic of relationships. Relationships were critical to the female participants as they networked and continued to connect with significant mentors and role models and thus, learned to navigate the university by building relationships with others. These significant individuals included counselors, high school teachers, professors, colleagues, and/or second-generation friends and family. All ten participants iterated the importance of building relationships at the high school and college levels. For example, Elle stated,

I had really good guidance counselors in high school to tell me to do this and that. They would tell me to apply here and go there. I just sort of lucked into it, because I didn't have a family to know to do that. It was my guidance counselors that recognized to know that I had that kind of ability.

It was surprising to me that high school support did not emerge as a major theme; however, significant relationships emerged. These relationships were much deeper than stopping by an office for scholarship applications, deadlines or university brochures. These women have latched onto significant people along their journey who have become significant mentors and/or role models. These are no ordinary relationships. Mentors are powerful, and this resounds throughout the telling of the women's stories, both individually and collectively. Wang (2012) reported that first-generation students look to significant mentors and/or role models for memorable messages such as: 1) pursuing

academic success, 2) valuing school, 3) increasing potential, 4) making wise decisions, and 5) supporting and encouraging by building relationships.

During the individual interviews, all the women mentioned either colleagues, family members, administrators, professors, and/or teachers who had contributed to igniting their trajectory. For example, Nikki passionately shared,

I had great high school teachers in a place where you might not expect to find them. They were little diamonds in the rough, and I had a senior teacher who had her Ph.D. in English from Duke and I knew that; however, I really didn't know what Ph.D. even stood for. I knew she was the smartest person I knew, or I felt she was the smartest person I knew, but she made me and my classmates feel like we were really smart and could do anything. So, I remember sitting in her class thinking, "I don't know what a Ph.D. means, but I'm going to get one someday."

She pushed me in that direction and I had other teachers who also did that.

Elizabeth added, "When I started developing relationships, I realized I was not the only one who was there with a struggle at home." One interviewee expressed that "teachers were critical to my success." Another interviewee stated, "I had encouraging colleagues." Another interviewee stated, "I attended graduate school closer to home, so I could be closer to my support system." It was astounding to hear how imperative these relationships were and continue to be to these women. Elizabeth concluded,

My journey took several years to complete, and at every level there was someone or something that motivated me. My mentor encouraged me, and she told me all the reasons that I should go on with my studies. She helped me with the application. She helped me with the financial aid. She said she was not going

with me the first time I went. She didn't feel it would look right for her to show up there with me. She encouraged me to do it on my own. She was the person who motivated me at that stage. Then, when I got to college, there was another professor who was a little woman in her late sixties and who had raised seven or eight children singlehandedly and was a feminist up one side and down the other. I admired her greatly. She had a Ph.D. and was so intelligent and was so witty.

***Research Question Two.*** How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate? The remaining three significant themes that emerged from this study aligned directly with Research Question 2. These themes were autonomous motivation, finances and disconnects between the culture of the university and the culture of their upbringing. In order to assist with analyzing the women's responses in relation to this question, a Synopsis of Statements/Phrases by Participants to Address Research Questions was implemented (see Appendix H).

First-generation doctoral students must navigate a highly "interrelated, web-like series of family, interpersonal, academic, and organization pulls and pushes that shape student learning (broadly conceived) and persistence" as they move toward their goal of the doctor of education (Terenzini, et.al., 1996, p. 13). Because financial issues and disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university do exist, without the autonomous motivation to pursue, enter the university and persist through the doctoral program, these first-generation women would have been, most likely, unsuccessful.

Holley and Gardner (2012) point to a lack of data related to first-generation doctoral student persistence. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) state that women are in the majority as far as first-generation students are concerned; however, they are less likely to persist in doctoral studies than their male counterparts. Even though women have entered higher education in greater numbers, gender-based inequities in educational opportunity still exist. This creates a cause for concern and calls attention to the immediate need for further investigation. Lovitts (2001) states that over the past forty years, doctoral student attrition in the United States has consistently been estimated to hover at approximately 50%.

First-generation female students with higher incomes are significantly more likely to persist than those with lower incomes suggesting that lower-income first-generation students are not “only disadvantaged by their parents’ lack of experience with and information about college, but also by other social and economic characteristics that constrain their educational opportunity” (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 418). There are a number of concerns in the field of research concerning women pursuing higher education. A study by Eltel and Martin (2009) indicates an intense need for financial literacy workshops at the graduate level. Once students are enrolled in graduate school, most are so concerned about repayment of overwhelming school debt, they put graduate school to the side, and many never return. It can be very overwhelming to any student but especially to the first-generation female graduate student. Concerning disconnects, family cultural capital on informing students about college enrollment, degree options and demands of the college curriculum is lacking for the first-generation female students.

Nikki added, “I think it was just the volume of reading and studying and not knowing how to do that particularly well was overwhelming.” Kaeti stated,

I never got any counseling in my high school about how to manage money, how to manage scholarships, how to manage student loans or to make sure I had adequate money to get me through the year. My parents just had no idea, and they really weren’t involved.

Therefore, these women have nowhere else to turn, except within. The next significant theme of the study is: autonomous motivation.

***Autonomous motivation.*** The second significant theme that emerged from this research study was autonomous motivation. In order for these women to gain entrance into the university and persist at the university was largely due to their autonomous motivation. Brophy (2008) points out one type of autonomous motivation, which is also known as Identified Regulation and occurs when one adopts a goal as personally important and valuable to her. Students engage in these activities, primarily, because they view the learning activities as “important for their self-selected goal of gaining admittance to college or a particular occupation” (Brophy, 2008, p. 132). These motivated female students include those who are “more established and those who perceive the doctorate as a professional continuation, contributing to career development and enhancement” (Wellington & Sikes, 2006, p. 724). Sometimes, researchers must point the way, by “offering a comparative perspective” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 40). The definition for autonomous motivation states that, it occurs when one adopts a goal as personally important and valuable to them” (Brophy, 2008, p. 132). As the researcher, a judgment call had to be made. The majority of the women did not link their success to

autonomous motivation. It was a given. All of the participants chose to enter the university and continue the path to higher degrees with little or no direction. They did mention both individually and as they were co-constructing in the focus group, countless times (see Chapter 4) when they felt they had little or no support. “The bridge from the unknown goes by many names, I have always been partial to the term inference” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 40). By pure inference, one would be led to the conclusion of autonomous motivation. The theory of constructivism entertains the idea of constructing one’s own meaning in the world of academe. “Constructivism is committed to study the world from the point of view of the interacting individual” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000c, p.158). As the researcher, I am called upon to make an unbiased decision based on my interaction with the data. This is not an altered state of data. As Wolcott (1994) points out, the data is the theory, and the theory is the data. To further reinforce the interpretation, one of the focus group questions asked: There is a favorite anonymous quote of mine: “In each of our lives there is a time and often a person who sets us on our trajectory” (Appendix F). Talk a little about how this quote applies to your life. On this subject, Claire elaborated,

My parents never pushed me for the A’s and the B’s. That was just my autonomous motivation. I just wanted to do it. I didn’t get paid. We didn’t have a kindergarten available, so my parents enrolled me in a private kindergarten, which was church run. I was the valedictorian.

On autonomous motivation, Nora added,

My dad used to call me “Sassy Britches.” I sort of became “Sassy Britches,” but it was very covert. He [significant other] didn’t know that I applied for the

doctoral program, but I remember getting the letter and hiding it because we spent a lot of time at one another's houses.

Sandy reflected,

My parents are a conundrum for not having finished college. They are very intelligent. My father is an engineer type who learned quickly on the job. My mother's knack is literacy, reading and grammar. So, I grew up with very high expectations. . . No one was pressuring me. I wanted it for the pure reason that I wanted it. If it's the highest you can go, then I want that!

These ten women all expressed countless stories both individually and collectively on the impact of disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university. The third significant theme that surfaced will be outlined below: finances.

***Finances.*** The third theme (also negative in nature) that emerged from this study was finances. All of the women reported having difficulty with finances, and some of the women experienced poverty as children and young adults. Concerning family support and finances, the majority of the women indicated that their families desired to support them but had no experience navigating the systems; therefore, they were unable to help. Finances and issues of poverty were profound. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) stated that a 2% increase in the probability of persistence for first-generation students was found with each ten thousand dollar increase in family income. Finances were a major issue, in and of itself because the majority the women struggled with poverty. The main reason the participants reported a lack of family support was due to the fact that families had little to no experience navigating the systems of higher education. The women had to turn to others, along the journey, to assist with understanding registration, housing,

financial aid and other critical issues related to the first-generation student. Rose iterated,

The cycle of poverty for me is parallel. It is not the same, but parallel. It's all about breaking that cycle, even though my parents were better off than their parents before them.

As far as finances are concerned, Nora stated,

My academic life has continued to enable me to be an independent women growing up in a situation where poverty was very real. Like I said, I am one of seven children, whereas instead of that father being the breadwinner, to be truthful, my mother was the breadwinner. She made just over minimum wage, so you can just imagine that. In my first job, I started out at \$4.25 per hour and I feel very, very strongly that there was never a man hired in that company at that small amount of pay. And, growing up in poverty, you are very afraid to go back to it. That crosses your mind a lot. Even though my family's precious to me, there were very difficult times financially.

On the benefits of an education, Elizabeth added,

Education saved me from a deep dark hole. It felt like a dark hole. The only goal they [my family] had was getting a paycheck each week and paying the bills. So for them, if that was good enough for them, it was good enough for me. I was never allowed to talk about college. My father would say, "Well you can put that out of your head. College is for rich kids. There was no goal setting."

The fourth theme that emerged from the study was disconnects between the culture of the women's upbringing and the culture of the university.



***Disconnects.*** While autonomous motivation and building relationships are positive themes, another major theme (and negative in nature) of the study was disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university. This theme resounded throughout each personal interview and during the focus group. All participants reported extreme difficulty [disconnects] in negotiating entry and persistence as first-generation students. Disconnects with navigating the systems of financial aid, registration, selection of housing/meal plans, and other significant issues were significant for these first-generation women. Much research has been written focusing on the difficulties first-generation students face in navigating the university systems of housing options, registration, financial aid, and other issues. Elle reiterated,

The first difficult experience I had at the university was when they wanted me to live in the honors dorm. I didn't really feel like honors material. I thought the honors students were coming from urban areas, and I was certain they weren't coming from my little hometown.

These navigational issues can be issues for everyone; however, for first-generation students, they had little to no guidance. Nor, do they have anywhere to turn. On her initial experience at the university, Elle elaborated,

I'm sure that you remember you have all the tables and you go and register yourself at each of the tables. Since I had no advisor, that was difficult, to say the least. I was eighteen on the college campus, by myself, in the gym, and I would stand in line for an hour and get to the front. They would say, "Course closed." Then, I would go to the next table and stand in line again. The process would just

repeat. I remember sitting in the middle of the gym just in a heap crying and thinking, “What am I going to do? I’m amazed that I knew to go and do all of this!”

During the focus group, on disconnects, Rose elaborated,

My parents did not know about university business; so, therefore, orientation and registration were quite difficult. My mother actually went with me [to the orientation]. However, I did not know how to navigate the system because my parents had not attended the university and so, being a first-generation college attendee created extra hurdles to overcome.

Elle added,

I didn’t have any help from my parents because they didn’t know how the university worked. We didn’t know that you’re supposed to pre-register. It didn’t cross any of our minds because we didn’t know to do that.

The women also reported about disconnects with family over their education. Nikki expressed,

Probably some of my family might be a little intimidated, but I work very hard to make sure they aren’t. When I first went to college, as a student, I had cousins who made fun of me for using a word with more than two syllables. I know that was a defense or coping mechanism for them.

Concerning disconnects in the work environment, Nikki stated,

I remember being in my job and a couple of you have alluded to it, but it’s called the Imposter Syndrome. You know, you’re doing your job and somebody might show up at the door and say, “I’m sorry, but we’ve made a mistake. You weren’t

supposed to get a Ph.D. Clearly, you are not good enough to do that.” I remember feeling, at times, just a little bit paralyzed by that and feeling... Who am I? So, that continues, every now and then, to be on my shoulder whispering in my ear. “You’re not supposed to be here.” It helps others understand there is a phenomenon that exists. Somebody has named it, and it’s a common experience for people for a variety of reasons. I would say, just that whole notion about that dark cloud, the Imposter Syndrome, has taken me a few years to overcome.

To Nikki, Rose responded, “I have found in helping others to push that voice off their shoulder which, in turn, has helped me push that voice off my shoulder.” Disconnects occurred at the university, in the family and at the work place. Sandy shared,

When I first started the program [doctoral], my boss was not encouraging. . . I did hear the quote, “It’s not worth the paper the paper it’s written upon.” She was referring to my degree. So, I had to take that in stride. It was hard to come to work with someone who I knew didn’t respect what I was doing. To be quite honest, she had zero respect for what I was doing and that was difficult.

***Research Question Three.*** What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education? Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 236-237). However, another profound quote is: “We do not construct our interpretations in isolation, but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 30). These quotes sum up what happened during the focus group. On a Saturday afternoon, six of the ten invited women met in a place that was

easily accessible and a half-way point for the majority of the group. The tone of the group was positive.

For the purpose of interpreting the women's responses in connection to this particular question, a Synopsis of Statements/Phrases by Participants to Address Research Questions was implemented (see Appendix H). One woman stated, "I've had opportunities to travel and network and through the university work." Another woman mentioned that she has had the ability to continue her research interests. Several women mentioned they have had the ability to inspire others in their families to return to school. One woman stated that her academic life had given her a "language for interpreting some of the things in her past and present lives." Another woman stated, "There were lots of opportunities to be exposed to things, to new ideas, new people, religion, culture and all the things that come with the university." The majority of the women expressed the opinion that they need to "pay it forward and help other first-generation students."

The women shared (some tearfully) about disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university, issues with family, issues with finances, issues with registration, and housing issues. It was obvious they realized they were survivors. They had survived navigating many obstacles such as registration, housing options, financial aid, orientation, hardships and other disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university; however, they had also learned they must pay it forward and help others along the way. They, each, fondly recalled significant relationships with mentors and role models who had ignited their trajectories to success as first-generation female doctoral graduates. As they united during the focus

group, they realized the need to express gratitude to all those people who had helped them along the way.

They also co-constructed their feminism and the power of autonomous motivation. As the women's stories were "relayed and the meanings were constructed, the reverberations extended beyond the immediate encounter. . .In fact, one was urged to look from the lived perspective" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 20). They realized that the issues at hand extended well beyond the walls of the room. They realized there are, possibly, sixty to one-hundred people who needed a thank you for making an impact on their journey. Rose said, "I had already started my list of ten." Claire looking toward me said, "Thanks for this opportunity today. It has made me realize how important it is to let the significant people in our lives know how important they are." Nikki added,

In writing things, I sometimes have an opportunity to publish a note of gratitude and I, like Claire, have so many people to owe for the good things in my life. It's kind of hard to say sometimes. So, just a note on something I can send them that has been published somewhere has meant a lot to them and a lot to me. I have lots of them, and then, in my particular field, I had an opportunity for several years to interview all the founders and prominent leaders in this field who all became mentors of mine. That book and my interactions with them have just been so meaningful. Again, I don't even know how to capture the investment people have made into my life, except to try to pay it forward into the lives of others.

Claire concluded,

There are just so many people along the way that kind of guided me in the right direction and they seem to have been at the right place at the right time...They have given such encouragement. One thing I am going to do is take the time to let people know the influence they have had. Sometimes they don't know because we don't tell them. I remember where they came into my life. My parents are in that group. They were always there for me.

### **Study Limitations**

There were limitations to the study. The opinions of these ten women were reflected accurately here; however, they may not represent all first-generation female doctoral graduates. I would have liked to have interviewed twenty or more women; however, time was an issue. Also, I would have liked to have opened the study to a larger region of the southeastern United States. Ideally, I would also have preferred that each of the ten women would have been able to participate in the culminating focus group. Initially, I did not realize the significant impact the focus group would have to this study. The ability for six of the ten women to gather, co-construct and tie their experiences directly to the frameworks of the study was powerful. The option of several focus groups could have been considered but I do not think the impact would have been as significant as the one collaborative group. If I were to do this study again, I would have asked each participant to keep a journal of her thoughts, significant memories, significant events and/or people who ignited her trajectory toward the terminal degree and provide consent to implement the personal journal as another source of data for the study.

Proximity was an additional issue. Even though two different regional locations and several different times were suggested, four of the women were unable to attend. One of the women reported that she had a meeting she was required to attend. Another reported that she was leading a professional development activity. Another woman declined due to a family issue and the fourth woman was unable to attend due to prior commitments. I did, however, believe that 60% attendance was conducive to a successful focus group.

### **Implications of the Study**

This study should ignite a trajectory for further study on the subject of first-generation female doctoral graduates. The fact that gaps exist, with reference to studies about female first-generation doctoral graduates and their persistence in higher education, should continue to spark interest in the subject. The blending of the paradigms of constructivism and feminism was powerful, because the women were able to co-construct meaning to events and significant people in their lives. They were also able to blend their stories with the threads of feminism.

I was, likewise, most impressed with the stories of the ten women participants and the overwhelming outcome of the focus group of six women who have navigated the institutional systems of undergraduate, graduate and doctoral studies. The women co-constructed and “stitched” the metaphorical Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) into a lovely work of art. Just like Dewey, Vygotsky, Piaget and other great constructivists prior to our time, these women co-constructed meaning of their stories and memories. They were able to create a new trajectory of hope for first-generation students for future generations

and also reach back into time and extend an arm of gratitude to those who have helped transition their bittersweet journey into a reality.

I believe this study will impact the scholarly higher education community at large but, more specifically, within the paradigm of constructivist feminism. This study should continue to ignite a trajectory to welcome policy changes for first-generation women. Since building those significant relationships is key then we as educators must be cognizant and have those powerful conversations about the importance of female mentors at the high school and university levels.

**Liberation.** Through this study, the women were able to re-construct liberation of self by blending reflection and voice while arranging and rearranging details and events which occurred along their trajectory. They were also able to explain why certain events occurred and reason both individually and collectively about their experiences.

This freedom is doubled. . .not just freedom from oppression, repression, [and]exploitation but also freedom to reach beyond existing systems of formalized power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action. The freedom found in performance. Found in telling stories (Kershaw, 1999, p. 18).

The women spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the disconnects with extended family, bosses, and, more specifically, within the processes of navigating systems at the university level. By continuing with the significant autonomous motivation within themselves and overcoming disconnects, building relationships and overcoming financial issues, they were able to co-construct and bring meaning the negative and the positive



experiences in their past. By participating in the study, the women experienced a freedom that only an education could bring and by co-constructing together through the focus group, the women were able to revisit their past and connect events, feelings, emotions, and liberation to their future.

During the interview, Kaeti pointed to her diploma hanging in her office and said, “If I used the same money to buy a house they could repossess the house, but they can’t take this away (she points to her diploma). That is one investment that you can’t ever lose.” Lisa, even though she experiences memory loss around the tensions at the university, she also added to this notion that the diploma is her pass to the past. She knows these events occurred, due to the fact that she holds a diploma and kept the transcript that was stamped with “Dean’s List.” These women emancipated themselves by their intense internal drive, autonomous motivation, to succeed.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

The participants in this study contributed to the field of education by sharing their feelings, ideas, beliefs and, most certainly, their voices, as first-generation female doctoral graduates. Some personal benefits to their participation included, but were not limited to, the fact that they were provided the opportunity to revisit their experiences and celebrate their accomplishments as first-generation female doctoral graduates.

Since the themes that emerged from the study were: 1) relationships, 2) autonomous motivation, 3) finances and 4) disconnects between their upbringing and the culture of the university; then, more studies should follow which will take a closer look at these themes under possibly different lenses. However, I would highly recommend further studies that blend constructivist feminism and narrative analysis, since the

combination complimented the study in a powerful way. This dissertation provides a multitude of possible topics for future research. One topic of interest to me is the plight of first-generation arts majors. Did their art/talent send them on the university trajectory? How much did their talent influence their decision to pursue university studies? This issue came up in one of the interviews, and as a first-generation arts student, I am very curious about this topic. The women also spoke of individuals at either the high school or university to whom they considered significant mentors and role models.

If I were to conduct another study, I would choose a more in-depth qualitative study which implements case study and would enable me to delve more deeply into the “lived experiences” of the women (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727). I would also consider a mixed methods study which focuses on women as first-generation doctoral graduates and extend the participants by providing a survey, interview and individual journals of the participants.

There are significant implications to guide effective policy and practice at both the high school and university levels. The responsibility of preparing first-generation students for attendance at institutions of higher learning and success both in the transition to college and in their academic performance at college should not be taken lightly.

Other possible topics for study include:

- Efficacy of doctoral cohorts;
- Similarities and differences between male and female first-generation doctoral graduates and their experiences with navigating systems;
- Advocacy for first-generation students in graduate and doctoral studies;
- Retention study for first-generation female students;

## **Conclusion**

This personal narrative was foundationally built on the frameworks of constructivism and feminism and initiated with three research questions, as implemented in research conducted by Jackson and Mazzei (2012), and which guided the direction of the research: 1) What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies? 2) How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate? 3) What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education?

As the ten stories unfolded throughout this study, a metaphor was implemented to symbolize the women's bittersweet journey. During the focus group, the women co-constructed and "stitched" the Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) together using the threads of feminism. The four major themes that emerged from this study were: 1) relationships, 2) autonomous motivation, 3) finances, and 4) disconnects between the culture of their upbringing and the culture of the university.

The four significant themes all directly connected to the first two research questions. For the final research question, the women realized that they, individually, must pay it forward to others and, in turn, assist with the disconnects that first-generation students feel. They also realized they can help lighten the load for first-generation students navigating financial issues by providing information about scholarships and other financial advice to make the entry into the university a smoother one. The women also realized they need to extend gratitude to those who have helped them on their trajectory.

As learned from this study, narrative inquiry and feminist research have the potential to change “others’ beliefs, attitudes, and actions. . .The urgency to speak, to get heard, to develop collective narratives, and to create dialogue. . .all of these are about the need to influence an audience” (Chase, 2011, p. 431). Hopefully, this study will help guide collegial and scholarly discussions about the support needed at the university level for first-generation female students.

## **Epilogue**

It seems this bittersweet journey is complete, or is it? I have always believed the dissertation would finally bring closure to years of study. Even though I am pleased to be finished with this portion of the journey, I do not feel I have finished. Does a researcher ever really finish? I think not. If anything, as I close this study, I am passionately pondering other trajectories this research could possibly lead. Isn't this what a researcher does? I am pleased to be finished with this portion of my work; however, I anxiously await further studies dealing with the work of the first-generation student. It seems this group of very courageous women has had their tensions, yet they have sojourned triumphantly. As I walked away from each encounter with each woman, I was touched, inspired and, more importantly, encouraged. I hope, as you met the women through this study, you were inspired, as I was, by their stories (both individually and collectively).

I am left a better person, researcher and intellect because of these women and their timeless stories. These stories connect to every first-generation woman who has persevered through academic time and space. There is no limit to these stories, for they have continued even as I concluded my writing. These ten women who gave their hearts, souls and voices so freely to this research represent the thousands of sojourners both before and after the research was completed. This book will have been bound and lives will have distanced us. However, there is no distance to the stories, for they live on within me.

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## APPENDIX A

### Demographic Questionnaire For Participant Recruitment and Selection

## Demographic Questionnaire For Participant Recruitment and Selection

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Race/ethnicity:
4. Regional background:
5. Socio-economic background:
6. Degree-granting institution(s):
7. Current position/job title:

(Jackson & Mazzei, 2012)

## APPENDIX B

### Cover Letter to Participants

## Cover Letter

Appalachian State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Studies Program

To Whom This May Concern:

I am currently a doctoral student at Appalachian State University. I would like to invite you to participate in a study of the “lived experiences” of first-generation female students who have navigated through an undergraduate degree, graduate degree and a doctoral degree (Mansfield, et. al., 2010, p. 727). Though definitions of First Generation vary, the interpretation adopted by U.S. Department of Education TRIO programs states that graduates are considered first generation if neither parent graduated from a four-year college or university.

If you would like to participate, you will be invited to a 2-hour interview and be part of a focus group. Over the course of several weeks, I will spend time talking with you during the interview and the focus group session. The interviews will be scheduled at a time and place that are convenient for you and your schedule. The questions for both the interview and focus group will pertain to your experiences as a first-generation woman doctoral candidate. Your participation in this study and responses to the questions will be kept confidential at all times.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please review and sign the Informed Consent and the Demographic Questionnaire that are attached to this letter. After completing both the Informed Consent and the Demographic Questionnaire, please return both to me in the stamped envelope that is enclosed. Thank you so much for your willingness to consider participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Reba H. Yarborough



## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent

## Consent to Participate in Research: Information to Consider

Title of Project:        FINDING OUR VOICES: THE BITTERSWEET JOURNEY OF  
A DREAM FOR FIRST-GENERATION FEMALE DOCTORAL GRADUATES

Researcher:    Reba H. Yarborough, Appalachian State University Doctoral Candidate

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the experiences of first-generation female students who have completed a terminal degree. By doing this study, we hope to examine and gain insight into the life events, decisions, entry and persistence of first-generation female doctoral graduates. You will be asked to participate in a personal interview and a focus group discussion. The interview and group discussion will be conducted on separate days during the months of May-September, 2012. The interview will take approximately two hours and will take place at a location that is convenient for you. The focus group discussion will be conducted at a location determined to be in close proximity and/or convenient for all (10) participants and will last approximately 90 minutes. Both the focus group discussion and the personal interview will be recorded and transcribed. What are the possible benefits and risks of the research? There may be no personal benefit from your participation but the information from this research will contribute to the field of higher education by providing insight and knowledge into the “lived experiences” of first-generation women who pursued higher education. To the best of our knowledge, the risk of harm for participating in this research study is no more than you would experience in everyday life. Your participation in this research and your responses to the questions will remain

confidential. You will not be identified in any published or presented materials. For the purpose of protecting confidentiality, each participant will be assigned a pseudonym and will have the opportunity to review/edit any data in the interview transcripts. During the focus group discussions, participants should not share private, identifiable information about others and should not share any part of these conversations outside of the group. All recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after ten years.

Who can I contact if I have questions?

Any questions about the study should be referred to Reba H. Yarborough (ry37875@appstate.edu) or Dr. Melanie Greene (greenemw@appstate.edu). Questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to [irb@appstate.edu](mailto:irb@appstate.edu).

Do I have to participate? What else should I know?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. There will be no consequences if you choose not to volunteer or decide to stop participating at any time. The Institutional Review Board at Appalachian State University has determined this research project (IRB#12-0210) to be exempt from further review.

---

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Participant's Email Address:\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Phone Number:\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### Research Protocol

## Research Protocol

1. Take me back to your first day of college and reconstruct the events of the day.  
(Include decisions, people, circumstances, etc).
2. What was influential in your decision to pursue advanced graduate study?
3. What tensions have you experienced between the culture of your upbringing and the culture of the university? (as well as in the years following)
4. What were some of the most difficult experiences you had when you first entered the university? (as well as in the years following)
5. What were some of the most pleasurable experiences you had when you first entered the university? (as well as in the years following)
6. What relationships in your life have changed as a result of your accomplishments?  
What is the nature of these changed relationships?
7. How has your academic life changed the way you interpret your past and your present lives?
8. What other changes in your life have you experienced as a result of your achievements? (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012)

## APPENDIX E

### Script and Guidelines for Focus Group

## Script and Guidelines for Focus Group

RY: I would like to thank you all for attending this focus group interview session today. My name is Reba Yarborough and I will serve as the moderator for today. I realize your time is valuable, and I appreciate your taking the time to assist me with my research. This focus group session is an informal method of sharing your thoughts and ideas in regards to your experiences as first-generation female doctoral graduates. You may reflect on any aspect of your journey (i.e. your experiences as undergraduate, graduate and/or doctoral students from the perspective of a first-generation female). In front of you, there is a name placard. For confidentiality purposes, you will be referred to by this assigned name throughout the entire session. Your identity will not be revealed by me at any time during this study. This session will be recorded and I may take notes.

RY: My role as moderator is to guide this discussion and ask questions. Please feel free to talk to each other. There are no wrong answers so please share your thoughts and ideas. Today's conversation will be recorded. No names will be used in my research.

RY: I am going to ask some informal questions in order to get your perceptions about your experiences as first-generation female doctoral graduates.

RY: Some things will help our discussion go more smoothly:

1. Only one person should speak at a time.
2. Please avoid side conversations.
3. Everyone needs to participate and no one should dominate the conversation.
4. The focus group will last no longer than 90 minutes. I will ask at this time that you check your cell phones and please place the setting on silent, if at all possible. If you need to keep your cell phone turned on, please place the setting on vibrate, and leave the room if you must take a call (Morgan, 1997).

#### Guiding Questions for Focus Group Discussion

1. Describe how you negotiated entry into college as a first-generation woman.
2. Were there any life events that were considered obstacles, at the time? If so, what were some of the obstacles you overcame?
3. Describe any life events that stand out as a motivation for you in pursuing, not only an undergraduate degree, but a graduate degree and finally, your doctorate.
4. There is a favorite anonymous quote of mine: "In each of our lives there is a time and often a person who sets us on our trajectory". Talk a little about how this quote applies to your life.
5. Describe any experiences that stand out in your mind from your perspective as a first-generation woman college student.
6. What life lessons have you learned as a first-generation woman doctoral graduate?



Possible Probing Questions (Morgan, 1997).

1. Would you explain further?
2. Can you provide an example?
3. Please describe what you mean?
4. Can you clarify? I want to make sure that I understand.
5. One thing that I have heard several people mention is \_\_\_\_\_. I am curious as to what the rest of the group thinks about that.
6. Are there any other thoughts that have occurred to you?

## APPENDIX F

### Excerpts from Subjectivity Journal

## Excerpts from Subjectivity Journal

### Asides

- Serving as a qualitative researcher is difficult at times. The researcher must maintain composure, even while gathering sensitive information. My heart was full of compassion and awe at her ability to thrive. It was very difficult to retain my composure. I just sat wide-eyed and tried not to tear up.
- This woman, not only thrived, but blossomed into this beautiful person through a difficult background and upbringing.
- I came from a middle class background and her story made me appreciate my upbringing. I realized, at that point in time, how much my parents had sacrificed so that I could take piano. That forty-five year old piano now means more to me than it ever has. It is symbol of survival for me.
- As I sit in the car and write, words are scarce at this time. I left this interview with a heavy heart. And, I thought my journey was difficult. “That which doesn’t kill you will make you stronger” is one of my favorite quotes. I could not imagine having four children and rising up like this amazing woman and deciding that very day to do something significant with her life. She is an amazing central office administrator, mother, grandmother, friend, colleague, and wife. She has overcome so many obstacles, yet, she still sat there with so much grace and strength.
- Each time, I complete an interview, I feel so blessed to have crossed paths with these women. In our lives, we have ordinary days and then we have these all-encompassing extraordinary days. This is definitely a day when my path crossed with a woman who has inspired me more than she will ever know.

- As I was taking notes during the interview, I felt an immediate connection to this woman's recollection of her experiences at the university, especially concerning registration. As a seventeen year old college freshman, I was also overwhelmed by the large gymnasium and what seemed like hundreds of registration tables. In 1979, there was no such thing as web-based registration. There weren't personal computers. Instead, we were required to stand in long lines and wait and hope for the best. I had no direction on which courses to take my first semester. I had not attended orientation due to obstacles. No one on campus helped me. I was totally alone during the entire process. I remember feeling scared and unsure of what to do next. As the line diminished, I moved to the lady who was registering students. I slowly eased toward her. I don't remember exactly what I said or how the conversation transpired. All I remember is, when I walked away, I was registered for a class and I had five more to go. That was frightening, in and of itself.

- This woman is very determined, as she has overcome many obstacles in her life, and exhibits a tremendous amount of autonomous motivation. Following the interview, I reflected back onto my own life following undergraduate studies. As I reflected, I wondered, "Why did I not begin master's studies immediately following undergraduate study?" I had never really analyzed my journey until this point in my life. Following marriage, my husband and I moved to Texas and he began his graduate degree. Four years into our marriage, we were expecting our first child. I had thought about returning to school but finances were tough, and I felt that my first obligation was to my family. I was teaching at a school outside Fort Worth, and in the evenings I taught private piano lessons. I also juggled my roles as wife, mother, teacher, with church responsibilities.

When we returned to our home state, I was in my fourteenth year of teaching at an elementary school and my principal said to me one day, “Why don’t you consider getting your Master’s in School Administration?” I had succeeded at becoming National Board certified, and I felt that my children were old enough. So, I could possibly juggle returning to school, while still serving as a teacher, mom, wife, daughter, and church pianist. Looking back, I believe it was my successful experience with National Board certification, and that one principal who believed in me that helped propel everything in motion.

- As with this woman, I certainly did not know how to navigate the systems upon entering college. In the interview she said, “I didn’t know how to navigate the system but I don’t think adults always have enough information to share with regard to financial aid, scholarships, and grant support. I came upon some of that knowledge really late in my career. But, hopefully I have been able to help others with some knowledge that I quite on accident obtained. We, as educators, are obliged now to help each other with grant opportunities, scholarships or anything we can do to help students and teachers progress on their careers and in their paths.” I hope I can help others along their way.

- I also can certainly relate to building those lasting friendships. I believe friends are important to success at the university. It’s one of those things that makes or breaks you. Very few people are totally intrapersonal. I am a little of both. I enjoy working independently to a degree, but for the most part, I enjoy social connections. I was at mother’s house the other evening and she knows little about my research. I don’t really talk about my research with my family. However, my mother had found a card I had sent to her during my first week of classes as a freshman. The letter reiterated the fact, the

immense value of building relationships in college. The entire quote from the card is displayed below:

Letter Home (8/23/79)

Mama,

How are you doing? I hope you are feeling ok and not working too hard. I wish I could be home, for it is terribly hard here. I will probably be living in this music building soon. I am really going to have to study hard to make it. I am finally learning my way around and my friends {cousin and other friend from home} really help me stay happy and laughing! I really got homesick last week and was ready to come home and I really believe I would have had it not been for friends here I know. You really have to have willpower, but you know me. I have it! The food is ok, but I sure do miss yours. Well, I have to go. I have class at four PM.”

- As I leave this interview, I realize this is another amazing woman and role model to many women. She is very determined, as she has overcome many obstacles in her life, and exhibits a tremendous amount of inner strength. It was funny, because as we were talking in the building where she works, a note was passed under the door. The note said, “Are you going to attend the meeting this afternoon?” I realized the sacrifice she was making to take the time to interview with me. She said, “I have always had the motivation to do the best that you can do. I have always been motivated to always put yourself forward, and to be on the cutting edge. That has always been a part of who I am, even as a young child. If something is going on, I want to be in on it. How do I join? How can I become a member? And not only be a member, but how can I be the leader of the group? So that was always me. That was my motivation.” I realized at that moment

in time that I was also an autonomously-motivated student and individual. No one had to tell me to do my best. I just did it. No one had to tell me to attend college. I figured out a way.

- It must be horrible living with amnesia about one's undergraduate experience. I treasure those memories. Yes, there were difficult moments, but I was very fortunate. I met my future husband during my first semester. Those initial connections I made had lasting effects on my life. Lasting friendships are imperative. I thank God every day for the friends and family with whom He has blessed me. Thought for today: "Allow us to enter into the other person's perspective-We begin with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful!" (Anonymous)

- When I left the interview, I was encouraged by her strength and determination. One can tell that she very much enjoys her current roles; however, she talked about the changes she would like to see in education. When she said, "My star has continued to rise," I knew at that moment which metaphor I would choose. It is funny. As I am talking to each lady, taking notes and trying to stay on task, I am also matching their voice and their story to an appropriate metaphor. The Journey Quilt (see Appendix G) is taking shape piece by piece. The telling is the key to the understanding thyself.

- The office was very neatly organized. She had carefully planned and carried out her aspirations at a very young age. To date, she is the youngest I have interviewed. I am in awe at her determination and intrinsic motivation. No one on either side of her family has received a doctoral degree. I wonder if that is true for all of the women? I had extended family that was accomplished, but I didn't really know them personally. I just heard about them. Also, as an undergraduate, I had a female cousin and another

girlfriend from my hometown on the same campus. Even though they were four years older than I, it helped to know they were there just in case I needed anything. But, I pretty much navigated everything by myself.

- This interview was very interesting. She is definitely more social than I. When she said, upon entering the university, she directly unpacked and immediately began socializing, I thought, “I don’t think I did that.” I remember feeling alone. I enjoy being with others but when it comes time to do a project, I stay pretty well self-motivated. I was inspired by her passion and love for teaching. I do identify with those attributes. She is very sure of herself and her calling and I, too, feel very fortunate to have found my niche in the world of education. On a more somber note, she also talked about her mom not understanding her position. My extended family doesn’t understand what I do, nor do they understand my degrees.

- The interview was very short. If I were to do this interview over, I would never have offered a late Friday evening. However, I was able to glean some information from her about her perspective in being a first-generation female student. She talked about her family and how difficult it was to serve in multiple roles, and I can certainly identify with that.

- As I left the focus group, I was speechless. Everything they said was amazing. I was touched by each and every comment. It was truly a power two and one-half hours. I never imagined the voices would blend in such beautiful harmony. I was in awe at their connections talking about disconnects, barriers, tensions, and “glimmers of hope”.

- One comment resounded within me as I drove home today. On building relationships, one woman, (looking toward another) added, “I was able to go back and



find a teacher who I had in 7th and 8th grades, and she had no idea the impression she had made on me. Of all the teachers I had along the way she was the only teacher who seemed to take an interest in me, and you know that means a whole lot. I wanted to make sure she knew that was true and there are other people to whom I have sent notes to and spoken to, but I owe some thank yous.”

- It was then that I realized the impact of the great mentors and role models in my educational career. I still remember my first grade teacher, Mrs. Pendleton. She was amazing and I knew at the moment I stepped into that classroom, I would be a teacher just like her someday. She had centers and her classroom was alive with learning, and I was intrigued. We didn’t have a kindergarten program. My mom taught me to read before I started first grade so I started the year well ahead and on the right track. I also had a great seventh grade teacher, Mrs. Kennedy, who taught me to believe in myself. She was an amazing English language arts teacher and I knew at that time, that I wanted to be just like her. She was so inspiring. She took an interest in my writing and made me feel confident and sure of myself. I had another connection with a children’s literature teacher, Dr. Alice Naylor, at the university where I attended. She extended the love of literature that Mrs. Kennedy had ignited in my soul. The next significant role model was not until graduate school. I walked into the classroom and I met Dr. Melanie Greene, who immediately became a mentor to me and remains a significant mentor today.

## APPENDIX G

### The Journey Quilt

## The Journey Quilt



## APPENDIX H

### Synopsis of Statements/Phrases by Participants to Address Research Questions

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Questions	Participant Statements/Phrases
<p>1. What was the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participant's decision to pursue doctoral studies?</p>	<p>Life Events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Attended graduate school closer to home support</li> <li>B. Had significant role models in my life</li> <li>C. Professor took me under her wing</li> <li>D. Principal encouraged me to continue studies</li> <li>E. Significant role models in masters/doctoral program</li> <li>F. Fond memories of graduate work</li> <li>G. Provided me the opportunity to learn more about my field....things I couldn't learn on the field, by reading, or from others</li> <li>H. Working with college students is a joy</li> <li>I. Felt more confident in graduate studies</li> <li>J. Didn't feel threatened by identity at university level</li> <li>K. Academic life gave me courage</li> <li>L. Had encouraging colleagues</li> <li>M. Accidental doctorate</li> <li>N. If it's the highest I can get, then I want it!</li> <li>O. I wanted it for the pure reason that I wanted it!</li> </ul> <p>Decision:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Likes the freedom of working independently</li> <li>B. Worked with strong leaders/mentors</li> <li>C. Had strong intrinsic drive</li> <li>D. Enjoyed smooth transitions; I just kept going</li> <li>E. Parents encouraged me to keep going; not to take a break</li> <li>F. Had great high school counselors and teachers</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>G. Had a great orientation experience</li> <li>H. Am a knowledge junkie</li> <li>I. I grew up with high expectations</li> <li>J. I started on my masters and just continued with the Ed.S. and the Ed.D.</li> <li>K. I had a successful experience with undergraduate and graduate experiences</li> <li>L. I continued for financial gain</li> <li>M. I completed masters in one year</li> <li>N. Enjoyed classes and enjoyed learning</li> <li>O. Enjoy acquiring new knowledge and greater understanding in curriculum and instruction</li> <li>P. I really wanted those letters behind my name which would open more doors</li> <li>Q. Desired a more professional role</li> <li>R. I needed to enter the cycle of poverty</li> <li>S. I had such a narrow view of the world</li> </ul>
<p>2. How did the participant negotiate entry and persistence as a first-generation undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and more specifically, as a doctoral studies graduate?</p>	<p>Persistence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Parents were supportive of my going to the university</li> <li>B. Honesty and trust were strong bonds between roommate and self</li> <li>C. Had exceptional bond with roommate</li> <li>D. Strong ties to faith-based community</li> <li>E. Graduate work felt relevant</li> <li>F. Was able to graduate in three years</li> <li>G. University life was stimulating</li> <li>H. Enjoyed social aspects of school</li> <li>I. Cohort was powerful</li> <li>J. Highly motivated</li> <li>K. As first-generation, was pulled aside in education department and encouraged to persevere</li> <li>L. Maintained friendships</li> <li>M. Education is a way out of poverty</li> <li>N. University is new and exciting</li> <li>O. Enjoyed meeting people who were</li> </ul>

	<p>like-minded</p> <p>P. Felt sense of belonging</p> <p>Q. Connected pleurably with classmates on an educational level</p> <p>R. Professor mentor was someone I could connect to and talk with</p> <p>S. I soaked up knowledge like a sponge</p> <p>T. Some of my closest friends, I met that first day</p> <p>U. It was thrilling for a young woman who wanted to get away from a very small town and start her adventure</p> <p>V. Had to learn how to manage money, scholarships, and other issues</p> <p>W. I enjoy learning new things</p> <p>X. I am a life-long learner</p> <p>Y. I love to learn and I remember taking my first humanities class</p> <p>Z. A lady was presenting about a new major that required a master's degree; She encouraged me to pursue the degree</p> <p>Entry:</p> <p>A. Roommate had similar values</p> <p>B. I remember being so excited about being there</p> <p>C. Awarded prestigious scholarship for undergraduate studies</p> <p>D. Significant role models</p> <p>E. Only way out of poverty</p> <p>F. Got in touch with key people</p> <p>G. Had enough sense about me to ask relevant questions</p> <p>H. Had taken college preparatory work</p> <p>I. Desired change</p> <p>J. Knew other jobs would never satisfy me</p> <p>K. Chose to open doors for self</p> <p>L. Had self-motivation</p> <p>M. Never doubted I would attend school</p> <p>N. Mom went with me to orientation, but she did not know how to navigate system</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>O. Had some background knowledge</li> <li>P. Classrooms didn't differ much from high school</li> <li>Q. Teachers who cared</li> <li>R. Teachers changed course of my life</li> <li>S. Teachers were critical to my success</li> <li>T. It's important to be matched with the right people at the right time</li> <li>U. Lots of opportunities for meeting new people; people my age</li> <li>V. An only child at home; needed to get away</li> <li>W. I knew, at that moment, I needed to change my destiny</li> <li>X. I wanted to be the person running the school.</li> <li>Y. I usually asked my husband, but I went on my own and changed my planned course of study</li> <li>Z. The doctorate was a culmination of my education</li> </ul>
<p>3. What have these women learned as a result of their experiences as first-generation women in higher education?</p>	<p>Learned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Opportunities to travel and network through the university work</li> <li>B. Ability to continue my research interests</li> <li>C. I have inspired others in my family to pursue their studies</li> <li>D. Academic life has given me a language for interpreting some of the things in my past and present lives</li> <li>E. Have more than our parents because of our education, but remain thankful for my opportunities</li> <li>F. Gift giving is difficult, because they cannot afford much and I want to give more</li> <li>G. Sharing in student's lives is invaluable</li> <li>H. Family is more important than anything</li> <li>I. Gained greater respect with family</li> </ul>



	<p>and colleagues</p> <p>J. I am a feminist</p> <p>K. It's not your gender or who you are, but you will earn exactly what you get in school system in positions of leadership</p> <p>L. Great things have happened, but I paid my dues</p> <p>M. Have had the opportunity to change roles frequently as new opportunities came my way</p> <p>N. Need to pay it forward</p> <p>O. Need to help other first-generation students</p> <p>P. I am now better at self-reflection</p> <p>Q. Academic life has given me tools, coping strategies, strategies for dealing with difficult people</p> <p>R. It's interesting to see how you were led to places by other people at the right time</p> <p>S. If anyone can do it, I can do it</p> <p>T. Single moms can have it all, if they want it</p> <p>U. People acknowledged my accomplishment</p> <p>V. I now have a greater understanding of academic texts</p> <p>W. I still read academic texts for enjoyment. I guess that means I am a geek.</p> <p>X. Education has opened my world view</p> <p>Y. There were lots of opportunities to be exposed to things, to new ideas, new people, religion, culture and all the things that come with the university</p> <p>Z. I really struggle with this whole idea of ignorance; I feel that, in my field, I make a difference in the lives of my students</p>
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## VITA

Reba Houser Yarborough was raised in Lincoln County where she attended North Brook III, West Lincoln Junior High and West Lincoln Senior High School. Mrs. Yarborough was awarded a full state scholarship and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Child Development/Elementary Education with minors in music and psychology from Appalachian State University in 1984. She is married to Rev. Marvin Yarborough and they have two adult children.

In 1999, while teaching at Bethlehem Elementary School in Alexander County, Mrs. Yarborough earned National Board certification in Early Adolescence English/language arts. In 2002, while teaching at West Alexander Middle School, she graduated with a Master of Arts degree in Curriculum from Appalachian State University. In 2004, Mrs. Yarborough was awarded the North Carolina Middle School Association Region 7 Teacher of the Year and was a finalist for North Carolina Association of Gifted and Talented Teacher of the Year. She served on the Board of Directors for the North Carolina Association of Gifted and Talented from 2005-2007. From 2004-2007, she also served as Gifted Coordinator for Alexander County Schools. In 2009, she received an Ed.S. degree from Appalachian State University and will complete the Ed.D. from Appalachian State University December 2012.

Mrs. Yarborough's other certifications include Elementary Education K-6; English/language arts 6-9; Gifted K-12; Curriculum Specialist K-12; School Administration K-12; and Superintendency K-12. She has served in the role as Director of Gifted Services for Caldwell County Schools since 2007. She currently serves on the Education Committee of the National Association for Gifted Children. In addition to

serving as pianist of the church where she attends, Mrs. Yarborough is also a member of the Executive Board for Alpha Delta Kappa Omicron where she serves as Corresponding Secretary.